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Taro Hitsuji

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kiyotaka Haimura



LAST ROUND Arthurs

THE SNOW MAIDEN

&

THE KING WHO
KILLED ARTHUR

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“Oh
boy...
What a
treat.”

“This
banquet
is in
your
honor!”

“I’m
never
not
dressed
this
way...”

LAST ROUND Arthurz

3

THE SNOW MAIDEN
&
THE KING WHO
KILLED ARTHUR



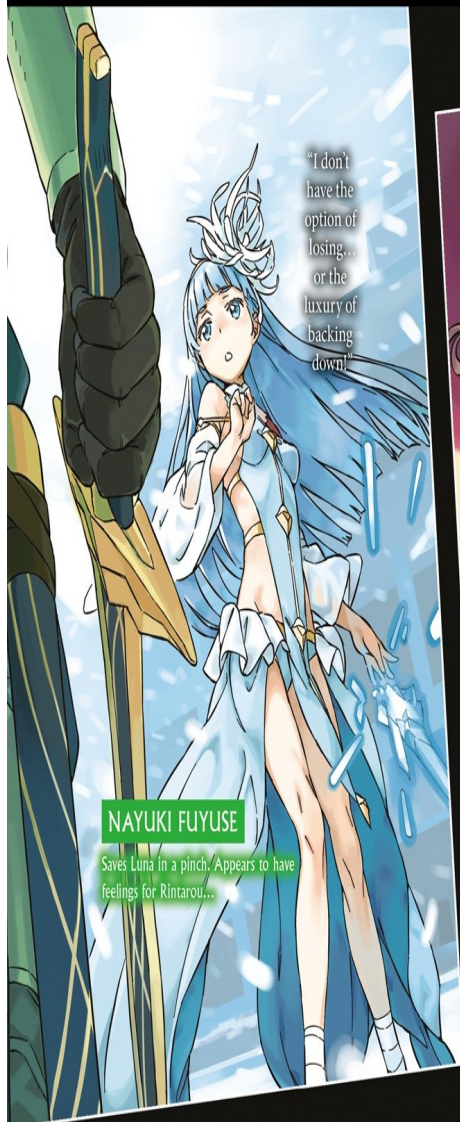
REIKA TSUKUYOMI

A mysterious girl whom Sir Dinadan serves. Works with Hitoshi for unknown reasons.

“Your death
will not be
in vain.”

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NAYUKI FUYUSE

Saves Luna in a pinch. Appears to have feelings for Rintarou...

"I don't have the option of losing... or the luxury of backing down!"



LUNA ARTUR

The candidate for King Arthur who is backed by Rintarou, High schooler. Injured from getting brutalized by Hitoshi and his accomplices.

"Ugh... Uh... Rin...ta...rou"



MORGAN LE FAY


Parades under the name "Elaine." The secret mastermind manipulating Hitoshi to crush Luna's group.

"I'm destined to become a hero...!"

...I have great expectations for you... my beloved King...

HITOSHI KATAOKA

A boy who doesn't realize he's under Elaine's spell. Candidate for King Arthur. Never questions his life's purpose of becoming a hero.



“...Y-you’ve
got to be
kidding...”

SIR TRISTAN

Knight who serves Hiroshi. Jack-of-all-trades. Strongest of the Round Table. Has infallible aim with his bow. Disillusioned by the world due to some things that happened when he was still alive.

RINTAROU MAGAMI

Reincarnation of Merlin. Activating his demonic powers awakens something inside him.

“You think
you’re all that...
but you’re all
nobodies...!
I’ll make
you pay for
walking
around like
you own the
damn place...!”



LAST
ROUND
Arthur

THE SNOW MAIDEN
&
THE KING WHO
KILLED ARTHUR

3

Taro Hitsuji

ILLUSTRATION BY
Kiyotaka Haimura


NEW YORK

Copyright

LAST ROUND Arthurs VOLUME 3

THE SNOW MAIDEN & THE KING WHO KILLED ARTHUR

Taro Hitsuji

Translation by Jan Cash

Cover art by Kiyotaka Haimura

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LAST ROUND • ARTHURS Vol. 3 YUKI NO SHOUJO TO ARTHUR GOROSHI
NO OU

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Over there is yesterday in all its radiance. Here is today, faded and colorless.

And tomorrow is bound in ashes.

We reached the dismal end of the play, of our dreams.

I watched it as the cold wind blew.

Yes, he was there among the Knights of the Round Table. Together with the one they called strong, noble—the once and future king.

Be that as it may, their swords etched him into stone, disappearing into sand and verse.

Like a dream at dusk, like a mirage of a fleeting night.

I watched everything as I slumbered.

Watched as the cold wind blew.

John Sheep,

FROM LAST ROUND ARTHUR

PROLOGUE

The Tale of a Certain King

"Hee-hee-hee... That was fun...", someone whispered in the shadows.

Evil reincarnate, worthy of the lowest circle of hell.

A man-eater. A heretical savage.

Up until ten minutes ago, a certain family had been congregating in the living room of this house—a warm space, a familiar sight.

But now it was a ghastly scene.

The wood floor, walls, ceiling, table, sofa... Every surface was drenched in blood. Blood. Blood... It was as though someone had turned over a bucket of it.

Corpses. Bodies. Human remains. A family had been stabbed by enough daggers to look like crowded pincushions.

What atrocities could they have possibly committed in their past lives to deserve such a brutal end?

With all the lighting fixtures smashed in, only the muted flickering of the television illuminated the travesty in the thick darkness. The newscaster's delivery was inappropriately composed, ringing through the room as if to offer their last rites.

At the center of this tragic stage...

"Amazing. So this is what an Excalibur can do... It's spectacular."

...stood a young girl in a black sailor school uniform, concealed by a hooded cloak. She must have been sixteen or seventeen. The hood was pulled low over her head.

Alone in the somber living room, she giggled to herself, surrounded by pools of blood.

In her hand was a dagger forged from a curious metal that gave off a luster that was neither gold nor silver. It winked in the darkness, commanding attention to itself.

"With the power of this King, I can kill to my heart's content... What a wonderful world... Running over with new and exciting experiences...", she muttered, gazing at her dagger in a trance.

"Hee-hee... Oh, the King Arthur Succession Battle... I imagine I'll have more opportunities to kill in the most delightful of ways in this world... Something that will make my soul sing... Don't you agree?"

She suddenly cast her gaze to a corner of the room.

"...Gh!"

A shadowy figure had crept into the space without a word.

Burrowed deep into the darkness of night, the figure was concealed so that their build and height were indiscernible. But she could tell this intruder had something to say.

"What? I see your eyes. Do you have any objections?" the young girl snapped, trying to provoke the shadow. "You can't seriously be thinking of stopping me. It's too late for that. Plus, what gives you the right? A Jack has no business stopping a King."

"....."

"Got it? Take note. I'm the King...the one to rule the world! And a King is allowed to do anything!" she shouted in rapture. "Just like the former King Arthur!"

The figure was silent—earnestly and persistently so.

She turned her back to the wordless silhouette.

"We're heading out, my Jack...to the international city of Avalonia. I want to commit the best murder. Something to give me life. I want to feel warmth slip through my fingers...and relish in my depraved desire... For this reason, I will become King," she declared in her cruel and joyous way.

She started to leave the gruesome scene, strolling as though on a little walk.

"...Out of the way," she barked in irritation, kicking away the corpse of a small child at her feet before sauntering out of the living room.

"...Gh?!" The figure gasped when her foot made contact with the body.

For a while, the silhouette just stared at her from behind...before eventually walking toward her in silence.

CHAPTER 1

Darkness Falls

Rintarou Magami suddenly snapped to his senses.

"Where...am...I?"

It was like everything around him had been daubed over with thick darkness. There was nothing but the void in front of him—a hushed and empty world.

Only his own figure was clearly perceptible.

"...Why am I here?"

Rintarou tried to retrace his steps, using his unique intuition to remember the cause of this unknown state. But he just couldn't remember how he had gotten here.

"Tch... What the hell is going on...?" he grumbled.

That was when the unexpected happened.

"What's up, Merlin?"

There was a young boy in front of Rintarou.

His golden eyes peeked out from behind his demonic alabaster hair, and his hooded jet-black robe covered his head. Sinister patterns wrapped around his exposed skin, which radiated a nauseating black Aura...

"You're...?!" Rintarou exclaimed.

He realized the boy looked exactly like...him.

The corners of his twin's mouth curled up, offering a lurid smirk...as though they were once close friends.

"Yo, Merlin. We finally meet... I'm happy to see you."

In contrast, Rintarou was shaken for a moment—

"The hell are you?"

—but he immediately regained his composure, barking back with his typical sardonicism.

"Hmm? Didn't I already tell you? I'm you."

"How should I know? Are you me from my past life or something?"

"Aaaah! There it is!" cried his twin, clutching his head in exasperation and looking up. "Merlin... I guess you're going by Rintarou Magami now? You know, I always thought you were cringey. Since the ancient era. I guess kids nowadays might call you an edgelord or—"

"Shut *up*!" Rintarou shouted at his other self, not bothering to hide his irritation anymore. "Answer the question! Who the hell are you?! Where are we?! Tell me, or you'll get offed!"

The other Rintarou didn't even blink at the threat, shrugging in disinterest.

"I'm getting secondhand embarrassment, pal... Whatever. It's been too long since I last saw you. I guess we should reintroduce ourselves... Well, I've already told you: I'm you, Merlin. If you're the front end of Rintarou Magami, then I'm the back end."

"...Kh?!"

"Just call me 'Id.' It'd be a waste of time to call each other 'the other you.'"

"Id...as in the mirror to my instincts...? Who's the edgelord now?"

As Rintarou clicked his tongue, his twin—Id—gleefully pretended not to notice.

"If you're here...we must be in my subconscious... A netherworld," Rintarou observed.

"Bingo. Making my job easier, pal."

"Like hell. Knowing you exist in me gets on my nerves... Whatever. I'm never coming back here again anyway."

Rintarou turned his back to Id, refusing to engage.

"Hey! ...That's harsh, pal..."

At that moment, Id made his move, coming around in front of Rintarou as though he'd teleported. He yanked Rintarou up by the collar.

"Gaaah?!"

Even a warrior like Rintarou couldn't prepare himself for Id's agility.

"I *said* it's been a while," he gritted out. "You might not have business with me, but I've got something to discuss with you."

"Gar... Ah! Why...?!"

Id held Rintarou up with an absurd amount of physical strength. Even when Rintarou desperately tried to fight off his twin, nothing happened.

C-crap... He's...?!

This was bad. This Id guy spelled bad news.

Tch...! Guess there's no way around it!

Rintarou instinctively activated fight-or-flight mode, invoking his *Fomorian Transformation* to face Id with his indomitable power.

However—

"What?! What the hell...?!"

In any normal circumstance, it came to him as naturally as breathing... But this time, it didn't respond at all.

"Hey! You can't do that, pal."

While Rintarou was distracted, Id threw him on the ground.

"Gah!"

"You obviously can't use *Fomorian Transformation* here. What do you think is the source of your power? You might have pulled it off in your past life...but you're just a human now. Did you really think you could control it? Heh-heh-heh...", Id chuckled pridefully, stepping on Rintarou's head.

Then he pulled something out from his pocket and showed it to Rintarou.

"...Is that...an *eyeball*...?"

Indeed. An eye of someone with a golden iris.

"That's right. This is the source of our Fomorian power..."

From the eyeball in Id's hand, something sinister started to mushroom, curling around his body before transforming him.

Rintarou couldn't believe his eyes.

There was no mistaking it. Their powers were one and the same—the power of the Fomorians.

"Got it? I'm the one controlling the power. Your subconscious. I respond to your requests and release this power...and I did a hell of a job at it in the past and present."

"...Hgh?!" Rintarou's jaw dropped at this revelation, and he broke out in a cold sweat.

"Hey, don't wet your pants, pal. We go by different names, but I'm you and you're me... As your partner from the other side of things, I thought I could give you some advice..." Id stomped on Rintarou, speaking like he found something about this situation funny. "We...have one purpose. Don't tell me you've forgotten already. *We've got to kill Arthur. That's why we were born...* Remember? How can you go so soft? How long are you going to keep at it? It's been this way since the legendary era. If you don't get it together, *we're going to fail again.*"

"Hey! What did you say...?! I don't get what you're trying to—"

"Geez. That wretched woman really messed this up," Id lamented, sighing and ruffling his hair. "Well, it doesn't matter. We're going to fulfill our purpose this time. I'm going to become you, and you'll become me. Then we'll kill Arthur once and for all. Capisce?"

"Gh... What are you talking about? ...I don't get it."

"Just use it, Merlin. I'll lend you power. Use my Fomorian power as necessary." Id continued to mock Rintarou, who couldn't hide his alarm. "When you use my power...you become me. You get closer to me... Don't hold back from now on, all right?"

"—Hgh?!"

In that moment, Rintarou shifted every last ounce of strength to launch himself off the ground, escaping from under Id and leaping away to distance himself.

"What did you say?! Don't mess with me!" Rintarou glared at Id. "Who's killing who?! According to what fate?! You're kidding! I do what I want... I decide for myself! It's my prerogative who I kill and who I let live! I don't remember saying I'd listen to you, you little shit!"

"Huh. You just don't get it..." Id started to look annoyed, though he'd been in high spirits until then.

"We need to kill Arthur... That's our karma. Our lot in life. We were created for that purpose. It's our *raison d'être*. Are you trying to deny that *now*?"

"Ha! Like I care. I don't know who made that decision, but it's not my business. I live for myself. I won't let anyone get in the way, and I'll be damned if they try."

"....." Something about Rintarou's statement must have touched a nerve. "...Geez... I knew I couldn't leave this to you..."

Rintarou could feel Id explode with enough fury to scorch the surface of the entire world.

"It's been a hundred years since we've last met... Maybe I should commemorate the occasion by trading places with you."

An unbearable darkness more saturated than the void before them started seeping out of Id.

"What?!"

It rushed toward Rintarou like a tsunami, swallowing him before he could think of a way to stop it. His arms and legs melted into the darkness, then it consumed everything else, leaving nothing behind.

"HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!" Id roared with laughter at the repulsive scene. "Don't be afraid! Remember what I said? I'm you, and you're me! Nothing will change if we swap places! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Shit...! Dammit...!" Rintarou struggled desperately against the darkness that closed in on him.

But...there wasn't anything he could do. No move could save him. The darkness was totally irrepressible.

Rintarou's spine tingled with terror when he realized he would drown in it and disappear forever...

FWOOSH!

Suddenly, the place flooded with light, blasting away the swampy darkness.

"...Huh?" Id gasped.

"What...?" Rintarou murmured in astonishment.

Their comments harmonized.

The particles of blinding light had blanketed Rintarou, protecting him.

It's okay. Don't worry, Merlin... I'm here with you...

A girl's voice pierced through his consciousness like a pealing bell. He recognized that voice.

In the next moment, the particles purified the space, driving back the evil darkness...and filling it with warm light.

"D-dammit... Is this...?!" Id started to panic.

He was the one swallowed by light, starting to fade...

"Tch! Was she here the whole time? Is that wretched woman here in this era, too?"

For a while, Id resisted the blinding light as Rintarou gaped at him. But...he eventually raised his hands in surrender.

"I give up! There isn't enough space here for me to win... I surrender! I said I surrender!" He shrugged, looking ticked off.

Even through that, Id was growing fainter.

"Well, fine. I'll behave for now. But the dice have already been cast. All was set in stone back in the legendary era..."

"What...does that even mean...? What the hell do you know that I don't?!"

"Who knows. But I'll let you in on one thing: Even if you resist, we're going to kill Arthur. It's all a matter of time...until you meet your fate."

".....NGH?!"

"I hope you enjoy playing teenager until then, Merlin. Wag your tail for your cute little King... Heh-heh-heh," Id chuckled ominously.

"See you...soon."

The other Rintarou—Id—slipped into the light.

And then the world burned bright.

Rintarou's consciousness started to reemerge from its deep slumber.

...

He...opened his eyes.

He could make out a white ceiling and white walls. The smell of disinfectant stung his nose.

This had to be a hospital room somewhere.

When he came to his senses, Rintarou realized he was lying faceup on top of a white bed.

Why am I here...?

He didn't even have the chance to think before he noticed something soft and warm pressing against his forehead.

He examined his surroundings, trying to clear the dense thicket of slumber...

"...Oh, good. You're awake," called out a gentle voice, driving away the last of his drowsiness.

Rintarou let his gaze slip to the side.

On a chair next to the bed sat a girl with her knees primly pressed together.

Her black hair was as sleek as a glistening crow's wing, and her eyes shined like black diamonds.

Her face was doll-like, but not in the uncanny, inhuman way. In fact, her smile felt like sunshine, granting him warmth of life.

Nayuki Fuyuse.

Rintarou's classmate. Her name in Japanese was evocative of winter, yet something about her made him think of spring.

Nayuki smiled at Rintarou, gently reaching out to him.

Her dainty hand grazed his forehead.

"...Uh? What do you think you're doing?"

"Checking for a fever... Looks like it's gone." Nayuki giggled, sounding relieved. "Plus...I heard you groaning in your dreams...so I thought this would make it better."

"Ha... I don't think that could ward off a nightmare." Rintarou brushed away her hand, looking embarrassed.

But Nayuki didn't seem to be particularly bothered by Rintarou's response. Her smile still remained.

"Hee-hee. And how are you feeling?"

"Not bad."

"...Do you remember what happened...before you got here?"

...Obviously.

It had happened after his fight with Emma and Sir Lamorak.

Rintarou had been at Camelot International High School, which served as his perpetual alibi. Luna had been up to no good, which was her *modus operandi*. She'd concocted another plan for a peculiar event that obviously involved Rintarou against his will.

...A swimsuit photo shoot for Sir Kay, if I remember correctly...

In the middle of preparing everything, Rintarou had felt faint.

It had felt like his soul was being ripped out of his body—a dreaded sense of desolation, like the entire world was plunging into darkness. As his consciousness had stretched further away, he'd been assaulted by sleep, plagued by pain.

He'd found himself hyperventilating.

With no way around it, Rintarou had been defeated, collapsing to the ground.

Luna had peeked at his face, holding back tears. Nothing had happened when she'd called out.

Rintarou had plunged into the abyss.

"...How many days has it been?"

"Three. We were so worried... Even the doctor couldn't figure out why you were in a coma... I'm so glad you're okay..."

"It's not that big of a deal..."

"Luna didn't leave your side after school for three days...but she couldn't get out of her responsibilities for the student council today. So she ordered me to observe you... Hee-hee. Sorry that I'm not Luna."

"What does that even mean?" Rintarou pretended not to notice Nayuki teasing him.

He mulled over what could have caused his coma.

...There was one thing that rang a bell.

It must have been my fight with Lamorak... I broke past my limits using my Fomorian Transformation... I knew I'd be in trouble...

Nothing had happened after the battle, and he'd let his guard down.

The *Fomorian Transformation* was a power of the Fomorians, a race of evil gods from the Irish *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* mythology.

Though he'd been Merlin in his past life, it placed an immense burden on his current human body when he wielded his frightening power. In fact, it eroded his life and soul.

But everything about the world bored Rintarou. He lived in the moment. A little sacrifice wasn't enough to scare him or turn him away, even if it literally meant his life. But he really went overboard this time.

And that Fomorian Transformation seems to have awakened something in me.

Id.

Rintarou hadn't known what had been sleeping inside of him.

Even when he sifted through his memories of his past life, nothing concerning Id seemed to come up.

What is that guy? What am I?

I'm the reincarnation of the legendary sorcerer Merlin... But maybe there's more to the story.

And kill Arthur? What does that mean? He's been long gone... How am I supposed to kill someone who's already six feet under? I don't get it.

He didn't think he would be able to answer these questions anytime soon.

"Tch... Looks like I owe you one."

He yanked out the tubes in his arms from the IV drips and medical machinery, hurling them to the floor. He sat up, ready to get out of bed...

"Hey! Stop! You need to take it easy for a while!" Nayuki tried to push him down.

She obviously wasn't strong enough to hold him back...but her sudden actions made him stop despite himself.

"H-hey... I told you I'm fine."

"I'll get a doctor to check on you right now! You *have* to rest!"

"Heh. Those quacks wouldn't be able to figure out anything from an exam anyway."

But—

"...Please, Rintarou... Would you rest...for a little longer...?"

He saw her concerned gaze piercing through him, looking at him deep in the eyes. For some reason, he just couldn't be mean to her.

"...Sigh... Fine..."

This was a mystery even to him.

Rintarou obediently obliged Nayuki, sinking into the bed.

She grinned at him in return.

The doctor had rushed over, requesting that Rintarou go through a general checkup and exam.

They were waiting for the results.

Rintarou maintained his stance, insisting he was fine, while Nayuki nagged him to go back to sleep like a mother admonishing a child.

For some reason, he acquiesced, lying back in bed.

"....." He gazed at her profile, looking like he wanted to say something.

"Hmm. ♪ Hmm, hmm. ♪ " Nayuki hummed to herself, contentedly peeling one of the apples from his "get well soon" gifts.

"...What are you so happy about?"

"This situation is basically every girl's fantasy." Nayuki giggled, continuing to peel the apple.

"Seriously?"

"Yes. Taking care of someone who's sick, staying by their side."

"Except I'm not sick. Plus, it's pointless unless it's with your crush... You won't get anything out of doing this for me." Rintarou looked fed up.

"Hee-hee-hee." Nayuki just giggled again, leaving things unsaid. "Okay, all done. Help yourself."

After a while, she served the apple slices in a bowl, offering them to Rintarou.

"...They're cut in the shape of bunnies. You're domestic... Unlike a certain someone."

Rintarou didn't hesitate to pick up one of the neatly cut slices, crunching into it head-side first. No tact whatsoever.

But Nayuki seemed genuinely gleeful.

"Oh, right. Luna should be here soon," she announced, gazing at him from the side and pulling out her phone. "I let them know you were awake. Luna just left...so I imagine...it shouldn't take too much longer."

"Ugh. Can you tell her not to come? She can be so annoying," Rintarou groaned, placing the now empty bowl on the desk next to him, having made quick work of the apple slices.

He folded his hands behind his head, lying back onto the pillow.

"Thanks for the apples. I appreciate it."

"Were they good?"

"Uh-huh. Tasted like apples."

"Ah-ha-ha. Oh, Rintarou. You never have to worry about me, but I'm sure Luna would sulk if she was in my shoes."

"...What?"

"Or would you be honest with Luna and praise her for taking care of you?"



“...Like I said... What?”

Rintarou and Nayuki started engaging in small talk, with Nayuki filling him in about the three-day vacuum when he had been asleep.

“I’m glad you’re fine, Rintarou. You know, Luna was so upset when you collapsed. I thought she would burst into tears at any minute...”

“I bet.”

“Hmm? Someone’s confident.”

“Obviously. She knows I’m one of her most powerful pawns. I provide a decent amount of utility. If my most valuable minion disappeared out of nowhere, I’d be crying, too.”

“Oh. Ha-ha... You couldn’t be more wrong... Are you the type to get dense around your crush?”

“...?”

It was becoming more obvious that Rintarou and Nayuki weren’t on the same page, but neither of them seemed to mind. Time continued to pass.

During their conversation, Nayuki’s phone pinged, indicating a new message. She checked it.

“Oh, it’s Luna. She says she just got to the hospital. She’s heading over.”

“Ugh... I seriously wish she wasn’t...,” Rintarou grumbled, scratching his head. “...But having someone come to my aid...,” he accidentally let slip. “It feels...strange...”

“Something the matter?”

“Nothing...” He snorted. “I’ve never had anyone stick by me, even when I collapsed from illness.”

He was thinking about the times when he had been treated as a monster, when his friends and family looked upon him with scorn.

“...But it feels like my time has suddenly been occupied with people.”

“I mean, yeah. Things are different from your past...because you have Luna now, Rintarou.”

For some strange reason, Nayuki seemed exuberant—and lonely at the same time.

“What’s wrong, Nayuki?”

“Stay by Luna’s side, Rintarou. Protect her.”

She refused to answer his question, maintaining her melancholy smile.

“I think you’ll be fine as long as you have her...and...”

Rintarou was ready to question her...

CRAAAAAAAAAAAAAASH!

Someone smashed through the hospital window, hurtling into the room. The body bounced three times off the floor before crashing into a wall.

The intruder shot up from the ground.

“R-RINTAROU!”

It was Luna.

She zeroed in on her now-conscious friend. Her eyes moistened...and in the next moment, she pushed aside Nayuki to barrel in on Rintarou.

She gripped his hand. "Are you okay?! I can't believe you're awake!"

"Are *you* okay?"

Because of her choice entrance, she was drenched in blood, battered and bruised from blasting through the glass and slamming onto the ground. She looked more like the one who needed intensive care than Rintarou.

"*Sniff...* I was so...worried!"

"I'm worried about you, too... Particularly your brain."

Rintarou gazed out the broken window, looking worse for wear. Based on the expanse of sky, he doubted the room was on just the first or second floor.

"If you never woke up...I just wouldn't know what to do! Who else would I force to do my errands?"

"...I regret regaining consciousness." He stared into the distance.

He could hear a flurry of footsteps sprinting down the hallway toward them.

When that registered, Luna suddenly pushed herself away from Rintarou.

"What do you think you're doing, Luna?!"

The hospital door violently flung open as Emma skidded into the room.

"Sup, Emma," Rintarou said.

"Oh, master...! You're okay...? I-I'm so glad..." Emma beamed for a moment, looking relieved. Then her jaw clamped down as she glared at Luna. "What were you thinking, challenging me to a race here and posing it as a 'match between Kings'? This is a *hospital*! Don't tell me you don't know what's right from wrong!"

"And what's your point? I can obviously fix the window with magic. Says the Goody Two-shoes who went all out..."

"Grrr!" Emma desperately tried to hide her ragged breaths, wiping away the sweat forming on her forehead.

"And this just proves I'm his rightful lord!" Luna bragged.

"*HOW?!*"

"I got to my vassal-in-distress faster than anyone...! What more would prove I'm fit to be King?"

"How does sprinting up a hospital wall and breaking through the seventh-floor window prove your worthiness as *King*?"

"Ha-ha-ha! Someone's jealous! That's why you became my maid after losing your right to be King! How about you learn from your mistakes for a change? And stop making passes at my beloved vassal!"

"Ugh! I—I wasn't hitting on him or anything!"

Luna and Emma exchanged glares, wrestling each other.

Rintarou watched their catfight, unimpressed...

"How are you feeling, Rintarou?" Luna demanded.

"The most important thing is you're okay," Emma assured.

"Geez... I never would have expected to see you in the hospital," Sir Kay said, filtering into the room with Felicia in her goth dress and Sir Gawain in tatters.

"Y-you guys..., " Rintarou said.

"Don't scare us like that..., " Felicia responded.

"I had a rough time dealing with the girls while you were out. Hmph... I can't believe you'd make a girl cry."

"Shut up, Gawain. You're the last person I want to hear that from. Making girls cry left and right. Home-wrecker," Rintarou snapped.

"Grrr! I'm only faithful to my wife, Ragnelle, now!" All the blood drained out of his face. "Y-you should be focusing on stopping the girls before things get out of control!"

"Fine! Then let's settle this with a 'duel between caretakers'!" Luna shouted.

"Are you sure about that? Housework gives me an advantage," Emma said.

"Ha-ha-ha! Well, I've got a secret plan!"

When Sir Gawain and Rintarou looked over at them, the conversation was already taking a turn for the worse. Even Emma seemed to abandon her demure nature when Luna got involved.

"Yes, Emma! Get her!" Sir Kay cheered. "Rintarou doesn't deserve Luna! As practically her sister, I think it would be better if you got together with Rintarou, and—"

"Traitor!"

"Ow! I'm sorry! Not the cobra twist! Aaaaah!"

With Sir Kay pulled into the chaos, the hospital room broke into total pandemonium.

Felicia and Sir Gawain exchanged looks and shrugged.

Rintarou folded his hands behind his head, lying on the bed as though he were simply exhausted.

"You're all annoying."

But he didn't mind this feeling.

He hated to admit it, but...this wasn't all that bad.

"Hmph..." Rintarou sighed out of his nose, looking up at the ceiling while keeping an eye on the fight in his periphery.

"Hee-hee," chuckled Nayuki as she continued to watch him.

The same day... Deep into the night...

An Air Smith England charter flight arrived in Area Eight of the international city of Avalonia, touching down on the second runway of Avalon International Airport.

A pair of travelers made their way down the ramp and onto the runway.

One of them was an older gentleman wearing a polished tailcoat.

The other was a beautiful woman in a dark suit paired with a jacket.

When the two made their entrance, they were surrounded by men in black who bowed deeply to the older gentleman.

He exchanged two or three words with the men before following them as they guided him somewhere.

The gentleman and the woman were led to the rear of a limousine driven by another man in black. They drove along the main highway, snaking through each of the areas of the artificial island, New Avalon.

The headlights cut through the darkness, where the deserted roads remained empty at the witching hour. As they swerved through the roadway, neon lights of the distant city winked at them like a chandelier.

They were headed toward Area Seven of Avalonia—the high-class residential quarter.

There resided the older gentleman's base.

"...The time has finally come, Lord Ainz," solemnly observed the woman sitting next to the older gentleman.

"As a King participating in this King Arthur Succession Battle, I will be battling all warriors... I'm looking forward to it."

The gentleman—Ainz—dropped his eyes to the saber in his hands.

He came from the family of Earl Ainz, a distinguished military household in Cornwall that's been known since olden times. He was the current head of the family—Sir Abraham Ainz.

Ainz was one of the front-runners in the King Arthur Succession Battle.

Upon close investigation, his build was impressively muscular despite his age. His eyes were as sharp as a hawk's. He could be described as an aged veteran, seasoned with battle.

"The treasure hunt has still to be officially announced," the woman explained. "But...it seems there's already been some battles between Kings. You would never guess that Souma Gloria Kujou from the Kujou Corporation and Emma Michelle from the Religious Order of Saint Joan have already dropped out."

"Hmm. To think there's a challenger strong enough to drive them away... I hate that I'm late to the game."

"Rest assured, I'll protect you—should any opponent appear before you. That's the reason I responded to your summons."

"Ha! I'm not worried. But I expect great things from you," Ainz said. Not even a moment later...

...the limousine exploded without warning.

"—What in the world...?!"

Ainz and the woman escaped by a hairbreadth, skidding along the road and burning the soles of their shoes.

They whipped around toward the limousine going up in flames in the distance, aghast.

"What's happening?!"

"Lord Ainz! Over there!"

He looked in the direction she pointed.

Ahead on the highway—about two hundred yards away—a pair of people had appeared out of nowhere.

One was a boy in his teens, a young man who seemed like he'd been coddled and never had to work a day in his life. He lugged around some type of long cloth package on his back.

Behind the boy was a male knight wearing azure armor and a surcoat. He was handsome enough to make them doubt their eyes and held a bow at the ready.

The two were staring down Ainz and the woman.

There was no doubt. They had to be a King and a Jack—participants of the King Arthur Succession Battle.

"Trying to catch us off guard, huh? ...Pathetic!" snapped the woman, fixing her gaze on the sudden intruders.

"Fair enough. This place is already a battlefield. Surprises and sneak attacks come with the game."

"But the driver...! Lord Ainz, we're—"

"I regret dragging him into this...but that's war."

With a meek expression on his face, Ainz prodded forward, using the saber as though it were a cane.

The assailants slowly walked toward Ainz and the woman.

Eventually, only a few dozen yards remained between them. Both sides faced one another.

"You're Sir Abraham Ainz, aren't you?" the boy asked, eyes burning with a mission as they fixed on Ainz.

"Indeed... And you are?"

"I'm Hitoshi Kataoka... The man who's destined to become a hero," declared the boy, carrying himself with confidence.

"Hmm. In other words, you're a King trying to become King Arthur."

"Basically." The boy flashed a smile at him.

Ainz gazed intently at Hitoshi, realizing something that he could perceive only from devoting his life to serving as a soldier.

The boy's carriage, appearance, and disposition...were amateurish. In fact, Ainz guessed this boy had never held a sword before. He must have been some normal kid who had grown up in a world isolated from bloody battles.

But he seemed to be strangely confident on the battlefield, which could mean just one thing...

The Jack... Ainz glared at the archer knight who stood at the boy's side.

When it came to those of the Round Table skilled in archery...there was only *one knight* that came to mind.

As if to confirm his guess, the archer exuded a threatening vibe, even though he stood quietly to the side. From his air, he could have been a terrifying god.

"...Lord Ainz, be careful. That knight is—"

"I know." Ainz nodded.

“—In conclusion, I’m the chosen one, the man who’s destined to become a hero. I’ll become King Arthur and save this world. I’m fighting for everyone. In the name of justice, I need to defeat you... No hard feelings.”

He’s immature, Ainz concluded of Hitoshi.

At first glance, Hitoshi seemed plenty confident, but it was all an act.

He was trying to pass off his own delusional beliefs, vanity, and a host of other issues by bluffing, propping himself up with a set of meaningless platitudes. He was trying to make himself bigger, desperate to seem like a more important presence than he was.

Which made him an ordinary kid going through a serious case of puberty.

After learning the untold “truth” of the world, he must have gotten carried away to the point of no return.

“You said your name was Hitoshi Kataoka?” Ainz asked.

As the sensible adult, he had the responsibility to warn him.

“Drop out of the succession battle. You don’t have what it takes to be a King. Even if a kid participates, you’ll get yourself killed and die young with regret.”

“H-how dare you...?! You...geezer!”

It seemed he was easily provoked, too. Hitoshi lost his temper at Ainz’s gentle advice.

“What would you know about my honest resolve?! You know what? Fine! Since I’ll have to defeat everyone sooner or later...I’ll show you my strength!” Hitoshi shouted before commanding the knight who stood at the ready behind him. “This is a royal order! Sir Tristan! Defeat them!”

“As you wish.” The dashing knight’s bow and arrows vanished into thin air.

He brandished a shining sword, saturating the air with an Aura that could destroy the entire world. He commanded enough of a presence and force that Ainz seemed like a child in comparison.

If Ainz had been an ordinary person, it would have crushed his soul to face Sir Tristan.

“Whoa!” barked Ainz, who was the strongest individual among the Kings. Cold sweat beaded on his forehead.

The color drained from his face.

“You scared?! This is my strength...my Jack, Sir Tristan!” Hitoshi gleefully shouted like a kid bragging about his new toy.

“Sir Tristan, huh...? I didn’t think we’d run into him as soon as we got here,” said the woman waiting next to Ainz. “Sir Tristan. Ninth seat of the Round Table... One of the three strongest knights. Up there with Sir Lancelot and Sir Lamorak. I can understand why that boy is so confident.”

“I see... A knight from the legendary era...,” mused Ainz, smiling to himself even as he stood in front of someone with military standards beyond those of the modern day. “I hate to admit it, but that Jack is too much for me to handle.”

"It would seem that way. Sir Lancelot or Sir Lamorak are the only ones who could *win* against him. And even then...their odds of winning would be fifty-fifty."

"If they were trying to *win*," Ainz said with composure.

That was when Sir Tristan launched off the ground. With the force of a raging storm, he raced toward Ainz, the highway cracking under his feet from the force of his momentum. His body was concealed by the tempest, through which his sword glimmered wickedly.

He had been blessed with power from the gods of war: Any sword wielded by his arms could bisect anything, including the earth itself. The strength of his arms was considered the strongest of the Round Table.

Given another moment, Ainz would have been reduced to a pile of blood and sinew...but he turned to the woman instead.

"And? What's your opinion? Think you could *take that*?" he asked.

"—A foolish question," she responded like he was stupid. "Who do you think I am?"

It was that critical moment.

Something boomed like a lightning strike.

It had come from the deadly sword Sir Tristan swung as soon as he was in range.

But the woman in front of Ainz blocked his blade with a spear over her head, which she held in her left hand with ease.

"What?! Halting Sir Tristan with one hand?! There's no way!" Hitoshi's eyes went wide. "Wait! Wasn't that—?"

Just as Hitoshi realized something was off, a blinding light enveloped her body as she continued to hold her spear.

Her Aura channeled into physical armor and a surcoat.

A gorgeous knight stepped out of the light.

For a moment, Hitoshi couldn't take his eyes off the maiden of war, who was commanding and charming at the same time. But it wouldn't take long for anyone to realize that she was missing her right arm.

Hitoshi hadn't noticed until then because she had been wearing that dark coat.

"The One-Handed Knight?! Sir Bedivere?!" Hitoshi couldn't help shouting.

A missing arm. This famous piece of information flashed through his mind, connecting the dots.

Sir Bedivere. The seventh seat of the Round Table.

The One-Handed Knight. Known as Bedrydant of the Perfect Sinew.

With Sir Kay, Sir Lucan, and Merlin, Sir Bedivere had supported King Arthur from the moment he'd raised his flag. She had been one of the longest-serving members of the Round Table.

At that moment, Sir Tristan and Sir Bedivere wrestled, blade against spear, matched in power.

If anything, Sir Bedivere was overpowering Sir Tristan.

"I can't believe it! How could Sir Bedivere threaten the strongest knight?! She didn't do anything noteworthy in the legends! ...How?!" Hitoshi screeched.

Sir Bedivere pushed back Sir Tristan. "I'm King Arthur's royal guard! I vowed to protect the king at all costs, abandoning the prospect of making a name for myself through military conquests and completing quests!"

"—What?!"

"I've been blessed with the Vow of the Missing Hand: By devoting my life to protecting the king, pushing aside fame, and refusing to go on the offensive...my power increases threefold for defensive attacks. Sir Tristan might be the strongest of the Round Table, but I won't let him through without a fight!"

"Hmph. I see you haven't changed, Sir Bedivere...", Sir Tristan grumbled as though bored.

"...Sir Tristan...?!"

"Why bother? There's no meaning in the world...", he muttered, appearing jaded and uninterested as he faced Sir Bedivere, who was burning with a mission to protect her King.

If not for the hostility radiating off his body, it was hard to believe he was a cornerstone of the Round Table.

"Wh-what do you think you're doing, Sir Tristan?! Hurry up and crush that runt!" Hitoshi shrieked.

"Hmm—" Sir Tristan considered before striking with his sword.

The blade skipped through the air, heading for Sir Bedivere from all angles. Like brief flashes of lightning shooting around her.

"Hah!" Sir Bedivere swiveled her spear—repelling, flicking away, snapping back.

A storm of sparks fluttered down like petals from a flower. Metal screeched against metal in a deafening collision.

As spear smashed into sword, the wind billowed around them, sweeping through the area.

But they were on the same field.

Sir Bedivere handled each of Sir Tristan's parries without retreating a step.

"My King! Now!" she called out.

"Cover for me!" Ainz ran like the wind, passing by Sir Bedivere and Sir Tristan as they crossed swords.

His goal was simple: the head of Hitoshi, left unguarded while the boy was separated from his Jack.

"Now then, boy...I warned you to turn down becoming a King."

Shing. Ainz drew his sword, sprinting toward Hitoshi. It was a military blade—an Excalibur in the shape of a saber.

The blade with its gentle curve glinted under the light of the moon.

It was like Ainz had ballooned into the size of a giant just from his hostility. He didn't even seem human anymore.

Though he didn't have Sir Tristan's presence, Ainz was enough of a monster now.

"I've dedicated my entire life to battle! War is life! Victory is honor! This King Arthur Succession Battle stands at the peak! I fight for the sake of victory!"

Sir Tristan was Hitoshi's Jack, which meant Hitoshi's mana had given him his material form. In other words, if Ainz killed Hitoshi, Sir Tristan wouldn't be able to retain his body, causing him to vanish.

"Eeeeeek?!" Hitoshi shrieked as Ainz approached. His body was seized with fear when he sensed murder coming from a true soldier.

Hitoshi's true power as a King had already come to light.

He was a true amateur, even though a few drops of Arthurian blood coursed through his veins. Even though Sir Tristan, one of the strongest knights, was at his disposal.

By some stroke of luck, he had obtained a Jack and learned about the dark side of the world to participate in the succession battle...but that was where his journey ended.

Ainz almost pitied him. But he was just getting what was coming for him.

He was young enough to think he was invincible. He lacked imagination. Those were his faults.

"I'll add you to my collection of battle trophies, boy!" Ainz shouted, picking up his pace.

He had caught Hitoshi at a distance where he could get him with a swing of his blade.

He had already warned the boy. But Hitoshi had stepped onto the battlefield as a King, challenging them to a fight of his own accord.

That was why Ainz sympathized with his first opponent, even if it was just a kid.

With the speed of lightning, Ainz drove his sword toward Hitoshi's throat. The blade pierced through the air, shrilling through the night as it closed in on his neck.

All would have imagined this battle was over before it really began.

CLANG! Metal screeched as a shock of light flashed in the darkness.

"What...just happened...?!"

Ainz's fatal blow had seized Hitoshi's throat.

But that was all.

The blade had only touched the muscles of his neck—without piercing even a single millimeter through Hitoshi's skin. It had not even drawn a drop of blood.

"What...?! What on earth...?!"

"...Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Hitoshi burst into sporadic fits of laughter, harmonizing with Ainz's bark of surprise. "H-how's that?! See? A-an attack like that can't hurt me!"

"Ghhh?!"

But Ainz was shaken for only a moment.

He instantly rammed his sword into Hitoshi again, showering him with nonstop slashes. Flashes of silver darted around the boy from all directions.

Ainz suspected Hitoshi had used some kind of magical defense on himself. The older man channeled more of his Aura into his weapon, using every ounce of strength to pierce through Hitoshi's defenses.

Ainz could have leveled a skyscraper with his attacks. But he couldn't get through to Hitoshi.

"Impossible...!"

Even if Hitoshi was weaponizing a powerful magical defense, he should have sustained some damage from the attacks.

However, the barrier hadn't even been scratched. His sword wasn't proving effective.

It wasn't that the defensive barrier had protected him from the attacks. Or that it was stronger. Ainz realized there was an underlying fundamental reason behind his futility.

Gh... What kind of power is this?! If it keeps up, I'll never be able to defeat him!

Unease was etched on Ainz's face as he continued to plunge his sword.

Sir Bedivere was holding back Sir Tristan.

But that was only for now—a product of her special ability. There was a huge disparity between their natural powers.

The invocation of her blessing devoured mana. As more time passed, Sir Bedivere was left at more of a disadvantage.

That had been why Ainz had launched a direct attack at the King.

However, now that this course of action proved impossible, continuing to fight was no longer the wisest choice.

Ainz's Excalibur was deadly, but it didn't have the type of power that could overcome Hitoshi's mysterious shield. In fact, they were fundamentally incompatible.

And there was no need to reveal his hand here, when he knew it would be meaningless.

As the natural enemy of warmongers, Ainz could sense where the battle was heading.

"Tch! Retreat, Sir Bedivere."

He didn't hesitate to decide to withdraw...

That was when a silver meteor shower poured down from the night sky, pummeling Ainz.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!"

Ainz let out an anguished shriek.

A streak of red blood blossomed like a shower of flower petals.

The surprise attack had caught him completely off guard.

His entire body had been pierced with enough daggers that he looked like a hill of swords.

"Glarg...?!" Ainz hacked up blood, crashing into the ground.

"Ah! LORD AINZ!" screeched Sir Bedivere upon witnessing the scene, trying to sprint to his side.

But Sir Tristan quickly thwarted her attempts.

"I hate to inform you of this...but I can't let you through, Sir Bedivere."

"D-dammit...! Move, Sir Tristan!"

In a rage, she tried to strike him.

"Hmph... I told you... It's pointless."

Sir Tristan maneuvered past Sir Bedivere's spear with his sword.

"As is everything in the world...resistance is futile..."

He shoved her back before slicing into her.

"Ngh?!"

This time, Sir Bedivere was the one who was pacified.

The Vow of the Missing Hand couldn't be invoked in fights where she was the attacker. Because Sir Bedivere had no choice but to strike, she didn't have a way to break through Sir Tristan.

"G-gh...! Th-they got us...! Was this an ambush...?!"

Ainz managed to peel his face from the ground...and spotted a girl at the outer reaches of his blurring vision.

She had to be sixteen or seventeen. Her black sailor school uniform was partially covered by a hooded cloak. The hood was lowered over her eyes. In the darkness of night, it was almost impossible to make out her features.

With darkened eyes, she looked down at Ainz as he sank into a puddle of his own blood.

In her left hand was a dagger forged from metal that gave off a sheen that was neither gold nor silver. It had to be an Excalibur. Which meant she was another King.

"Good job, Reika Tsukuyomi! You never let me down as my vassal!" Hitoshi clapped gleefully, thrilled.

Then he looked at Ainz, whose consciousness was slipping away.

"How's that, Sir Ainz? I'm going to become a hero. Reika decided to become my vassal when she saw my potential, even though she's a King. *And* I've got the strongest Jack, Sir Tristan... Do you get it now? When you've got the makings of a true king, vassals flock to you. That's what makes me different from you. Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Hitoshi beamed. He seemed so pleased that a kid had won against an adult.

"D-damn you...! This must be some mistake...! I can't believe *I*...would end up...!"

Ainz writhed in a sea of his own blood. But his fate had already been sealed.

"Bye-bye, Sir Ainz. Hope you watch over my glorious path to become king from the skies."

"You little...! CURSE YOU!" Ainz spat blood, standing up to get in at least one last blow. "Royal Road...! Command—"

Using the last of his life, he tried to pool his mana into his Excalibur.

That was when Reika blurred as if disappearing into mist.

A white flash flooded the area.

Swiftly and soundlessly, Reika's sword closed in on Ainz as she approached him.

Her weapon of choice wasn't the dagger—her Excalibur—in her left hand.

At some point, she had come to hold an ornamental sword with a white blade in her other hand.

It skewered the left side of Ainz's chest.

"Gah?! Glarg?! *Cough...* I—I can't believe it...!"

It neatly snuffed out the last vestiges of Ainz's life.

He stumbled, crumpling like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

"L-Lord Ainz...!? T-tell me this isn't happening..." Sir Bedivere was left stunned, falling to her knees.

Eventually, his mana cut off, causing her body to melt into thin air...until nothing was left.

"Finally... The geezer was all talk. Not a big deal at all..." Hitoshi blurted out in what sounded like disappointment.

That was his only reaction. Someone had just died, and that was all he could offer. His moral compass seemed out of whack.

"I wonder if the other Kings are like this, too. I mean, it's going to be too easy for me to become the hero and save the world... Welp. Whatever. Our team is unstoppable!"

As his group gathered around him, Hitoshi grinned.

"Good job, Sir Tristan, Reika. Your king is pleased to see you handled that."

It was their turn to respond.

"It's not like...I care or anything..." Sir Tristan answered, gaze empty.

"..." Reika was silent, coldly casting her eyes on Hitoshi.

"All right... Cool. What's our next move to secure me the position of a true hero and King Arthur...? Elaine? I know you're here," Hitoshi called out.

"...Yes, my king... I'm here."

...The shadows seemed to coil in the air, oozing out a human figure.

It was a girl wearing a black hood and robe.

Slivers of supple skin peeked out from the robe. It was obvious that her outfit under it was risqué. A sweet scent wafted from her.

The left side of her face was hidden behind lace, but there was enough revealed to know it was bewitching to the point that it sent shivers up a person's spine.

Her beauty burned into the eyes of all who beheld her. No one could resist carnal arousal around her enticing scent. Hitoshi audibly gulped.

"Hee-hee. A splendid outcome, my beloved king. You've grown into such a kingly figure in such a short time... If I may be so bold, I can't stop my heart from pounding."

The girl named Elaine smiled at Hitoshi.

"Th-thanks to you discovering my potential as king, Elaine." Hitoshi's face turned bright red as he grew excited. "Because of you, I was able to awaken my true self as a king... I'm special... Nothing like those idiots and children around me...I'm destined to become a hero...!"

"That's right, Master Hitoshi. You are the chosen one. There's a clear boundary between you and the average human. Fate brought us together—so I could serve a great king... I'm not fit to receive your guidance and praise."

"Uh, Elaine... M-meeting you was a dream come true...," Hitoshi managed to say.

"Oh, Master Hitoshi... I don't deserve to hear that..." Elaine continued to smile, enchanting him with her gentle grin.

Like perfumed poison, she was thick with guile.

"And Reika Tsukuyomi, who you introduced to me, has served me well..." Hitoshi admitted.

"With your potential, gifted vassals will obviously come to you, Master Hitoshi. I can guarantee more will be drawn to you in the future and kneel before you. Please. Keep your head up high," Elaine waxed lyrically.

"R-right... You're totally right...! Ha-ha-ha!" Hitoshi nodded fervently. "Now, Elaine, tell me. Who should I fight next on my journey to herohood?"

"About that... There's a group you urgently need to squash..."

"Who?"

"...Luna Artur's faction..."

Her smile turned slightly icy, but...Hitoshi didn't seem to catch it.

"Luna's group couldn't be more different from you. She wants the throne for her own selfish reasons... To become the true hero, you must kill them using any means necessary."

"Is Luna really that evil?"

"Yes. Have you heard about the incident that obliterated the top floor of the Central City Park Hotel? That's just one deed carried out by her minions..."

"What?!"

"One wrong move could have risked the lives of civilians. They cannot be reasoned with... Do you understand, Master Hitoshi...?"

"Yeah. No hero would let them off the hook! Luna Artur...I'll defeat your team!" Hitoshi seemed to have made up his mind.

Elaine continued to grin...though her smile had clouded over, as if it lurked in the shadows.

"...I have great expectations for you...my beloved king..."

She hadn't weaponized magic to manipulate him. She had just exploited his dark desires that prowled in human hearts: greed, vanity, rebellion.

It came as naturally to Elaine as breathing.

She was Morgan le Fay—the witch spoken of in legends.

Someone watched Hitoshi and Morgan's exchange from a distance.

"Looks like it went well, Reika...my King."

Reika Tsukuyomi spun around when she was addressed from behind, meeting eyes with a Jack in battered armor and a surcoat.

A middle-aged knight with sullen features. He had a playful charm to him, though he could have easily blended into a group of businessmen on the last train home.

If he'd been born in a different generation, a can of coffee and a cigarette would have completed his look.

"You seem dissatisfied," observed the Jack. "Does getting manipulated by a witch leave a bad taste in your mouth?"

"Of course not, Sir Dinadan. This is what I asked for," Reika replied, chuckling stiffly from under her hood.

Sir Dinadan was *not* part of the numbered seats of the Round Table.

In any normal circumstance, a King would summon a Jack from the numbered positions, excluding King Arthur—the first seat—and the cursed thirteenth seat. That shrank their options to the second to twelfth seats... In other words, they could select from the eleven knights chosen to sit in the highest positions at the Round Table.

Sir Dinadan was a member of the knights of the Round Table, but...he hadn't been chosen for the table himself.

He was just a normal knight. A dime a dozen.

According to the rules of the King Arthur Succession Battle, it was strange to summon Sir Dinadan as a Jack... But Reika acted like this situation was the most natural thing in the world.

"There's something I must do," she continued. "I need to lie low right now. I'm *used to this*."

"Ah... Right." Sir Dinadan sighed. "You never change. I...wish you didn't have to do this... Like, maybe you should loosen the tension in your shoulders and enjoy life?"

"None of your business. You're supposed to be my Jack. I wish you'd be more cooperative. At least participate in battle..." Reika trailed off, shooting daggers at Sir Dinadan.

She suddenly peeled her eyes off him as though her attention had been redirected elsewhere.

"...Or is it that you don't *want* to help me?"

"Uh-uh! You're totally off base," Sir Dinadan replied in a joking way. "It's just that I'm not very strong, if I'm being honest. I'd hold Tristie back. And I'm not good at surprise attacks like you are. Ha-ha-ha. But I guess I was great at singing and getting people to laugh!"

"...Right... I guess you were..." Reika became quiet.

"Ha-ha-ha, but don't worry, Reika." With a hoot of laughter, he slapped her shoulder as she wore a sullen expression. "You might not believe in me, but I was thrilled when you summoned me!"

"..."

"I think I was brought here...to see what you would do in this world... I'm sure I'm here to see it with my own eyes."

For some reason, he made deep eye contact with her.

Though he was joking, his gaze seemed pensive.

When he looked at Reika, Sir Dinadan was like a father watching over his daughter.

That night, plans began to kick off all at once.



CHAPTER 2

Under the Stars

It was the day after Rintarou had been released from the hospital, noon on a weekend.

"Everyone have a drink?!" Luna called out in the garden of her home base, Logres Manor.

The English garden was diligently maintained by broonies summoned by Rintarou's magic. They arranged the flower beds with a variety of flowering plants and trimmed the shrubs into geometric shapes. It stayed true to the inspiration.

There was an open area around the fountain in the garden. They had set up a grill packed with high-grade charcoal. The fire burned red as it crackled audibly. Meat, vegetables, and seafood were stacked on top of the grill's wire netting. The smoke carried the smell of the roast.

"Let's toast to Rintarou's recovery! To getting released from the hospital!" Luna cried.

""""""""Cheers!""""""""

Raising their cups were Sir Kay, Felicia, Sir Gawain, and Emma—the residents of Logres Manor—and their special guest, Nayuki.

Luna's impromptu party kicked off.

"Heh-heh! Check out this mind-blowing barbecue! We've got tons of food and drinks! Make yourselves at home! Plan to eat and drink all day!"

Luna gently kicked one of the coolers containing chilled cans and bottles. It was also crowded with refrigerated oysters and crabs... The coolers were packed to the brim.

"W-wow! Meat!" Felicia exclaimed. "I've never seen so much of it...! A luxury! I don't even know how long it's been since I've had some!"

"My king! This is your chance! Eat, eat, eat! You must procure sustenance now!"

Felicia and Sir Gawain were shaking...failing to hold back their tears at the sight of the spread before them.

"A feast during this time... Brave of you, Luna," Sir Kay said.

"You think?"

Luna reclined on a folding chair, crossing her legs and holding a wineglass filled with grape juice.

"Since I became a King, all we've done is fight...and it's put a big burden on Rintarou, too."

"Yeah. If he hadn't been there, we would not have survived many of the battles."

"Plus, today is Rintarou's..." Luna trailed off, suddenly cutting herself short. "A-anyway, this is just a token of my gratitude! It's my duty as a King to commend my vassals. And now I have Felicia, Sir Gawain, and Emma... I'm collecting more vassals with each passing day. This is a great opportunity to strengthen the bonds with my subjects. You know, to increase solidarity and all that jazz."

Apparently, even a fellow King like Felicia was a "subject" in Luna's eyes.

"Rintarou, you'd better be grateful to your kind King! This banquet is in your honor, after all!" Luna shouted, planting a hand on her hip and turning to face Rintarou.

She jabbed a finger at him.

"And take a look at our clothes!"

Luna seemed to purposefully pose in a sexy way.

For some reason, Luna and Sir Kay were wearing very revealing sailor swimsuits.

"Heh... For you! I bet this will make your blood surge through your veins! Ha-ha-ha! Men love this kind of stuff, right? Well, feast your eyes on this!"

Luna was as arrogant as always.

"What? Our clothes? What do you mean? I'm never not dressed this way..."

Sir Kay's eyes grew distant. She looked like she was attempting to escape reality.

Well, even though their outfits were questionable at best, they were drop-dead gorgeous.

"Oh boy... What a treat," Rintarou grumbled, offering one offhand remark and seeming decidedly unimpressed. "A banquet in my honor, huh? Except I had to pay for the grill and the food out of my own pocket. Thank you so much for letting me prepare everything for this barbecue!"

Rintarou was fanning the flame inside the giant grill from the air vent.

"You're welcome! I know guys *love* this kind of stuff!" Luna trilled.

"That was sarcasm, you idiot!" Rintarou grabbed a piece of coal from the box of unused charcoal and chucked it at Luna.

Luna dodged it with a sassy look on her face.

"I can't believe you dumped the responsibility on me...! If this is supposed to be in *my* honor, why don't you help out?"

"Listen to yourself! Are you really trying to force a girl to tend the fire? What would you do if I was burned by an ember?! This is a boy's job!"

"F-fine! I mean, it's your fault for putting on that stupid getup!"

Rintarou pointed at the coolers filled with food, annoyed.

"Whatever. What's this?! Kobe beef?! Giant oysters?! Crab?! Matsutake mushrooms?! Are you an idiot?! Do you know how much we blew on this banquet?! We already have trouble keeping our kitchen stocked! Do you have any thoughts in your head?!"

"Wow... This takes me back. My foolish stepbrother, Arthur, would use any opportunity to squander the treasury on extravagant feasts... As the minister of the state, I was the one who bore the brunt of it...," Sir Kay muttered, eyes unfocused.

"Heh-heh! Don't sweat the small stuff! I'm going to become king anyway! Stop complaining and pop those suckers on the grill! Just keep 'em coming!"

"Guess manning the grill is my responsibility, too... What were you saying about commending your vassals?"

Luna deftly wielded her fork to swipe a piece of meat from under Rintarou's nose.

"Nommmmm. ♪ Yum! At almost eighty-four thousand dollars per ounce, it's got to be special! It's melting in my mouth!"

"Wh-what?! You little shit!" Rintarou screeched when the total sum went far beyond his imagination.

He was scared. He was genuinely terrified of looking at the receipt. In fact, he hadn't even felt this much terror when he'd faced off against Sir Lancelot or Sir Lamorak.

"Just let it go, Rintarou. There's not much we can do now," Sir Kay tried to console Rintarou as he went pale. "Even though things might not sit well with us, this *is* a celebration of you, after all. It'd be a waste if you don't enjoy it."

"...I guess... Nothing will change even if I complain..." Rintarou lined up scallions on top of the grill with tongs and spaced them out. "Oh, Felicia, Gawain, I saved some meat for you on that side. Fourteen dollars per ounce. Cheap meat. All you can eat."

"You're the worst!"

"Jerk!"

Poor Felicia and Sir Gawain were about to have a tantrum on the spot.

The party was becoming louder.

"Wait?! Felicia! I was just grilling that piece of meat! Give it back!"

"Hmph! Says the girl who swiped my precious baked potato!"

"Wh-what's gotten into you?! Who cares about a baked potato?! There are big-ticket items to be had! Why would you care about something as cheap as—?"

"Potatoes *are* a luxury! At least to the Ferald family! Don't treat me like an idiot!"

Luna and Felicia eyed each other, crossing tongs on top of the grill.

"Please stop!" Sir Gawain shouted. "This is a recipe for disaster!"

He was just trying to smooth things over.

Meanwhile, with the barbecue between them, Sir Kay was complaining to Emma.

"*Sniff... Hic...* Arthur was just so terrible..."

"Uh-huh..."

It seemed cans of *shochu* had been mixed among the nonalcoholic drinks in the coolers. Sir Kay whined with her drink in hand, face flushed. She had already started slurring her words.

"It was like he didn't even get what logee-sticks are, and—*hic*—he always made me use the funds to their last dregs... *Snurp!* He was always like, 'Nice! We've still got some money, even after that long battle! The kingdom is still doing great! Let's party!'"

"Th-that...must have been tough, Sir Kay..." Emma could only offer a half-hearted smile.

Total chaos, huh...? Rintarou kept his emotions in check, observing everyone as he absentmindedly continued to grill.

The second he took anything off the grill, the food would disappear straight into everyone else's mouths.

Which meant Rintarou hadn't had a chance to eat anything at all.

...Who is this banquet for again? In all seriousness. He was starting to find something wrong at the root as he flipped the meat...

Plit. Something cold hit his cheek, which was surprising because his face was burning from the heat of the coal.

His eyes shifted to the side...

"Thanks for your work, Rintarou."

Nayuki stood next to him. She held a bowl of chopped vegetables in one hand.

She had pressed a chilled can of cola against his skin, and she was flashing him a mischievous grin.

"I was just chopping up some more veggies... Want me to man the grill?"

"You sure? That would be awesome. I was just about to pay for my own party without eating a single thing. Which would have been ridiculous."

Rintarou wiped away his sweat with the towel around his neck and sighed, handing over the tongs to Nayuki.

"Ha-ha. Never imagined you would be in charge of the grill, Rintarou."

"...Process of elimination. Do you really think they'd volunteer? Emma is the only one who might help, but she's dealing with Sir Kay..."

Rintarou cracked open the can.

Psht! It fizzed. He chugged it down.

The carbonation shocked his parched throat.

"Ahhh!" He sighed, hunkering down on a folding chair under a parasol.

He sipped the cola as he watched the rest of the group, unimpressed.

"...Having fun, Rintarou?" Nayuki asked, flipping food on the grill.

"What does it look like?" He took another swig of soda, dodging her question.

"Ha-ha... Someone isn't honest," she teased, smiling like she knew better.

"Hmph..."

He made a face at her.

"Hey, Rintarou... What do you think of Luna?" she suddenly asked.

“...What?”

“When you collapsed...Luna was really worried about you. She even said she’d take a break from school to stay by your side and take care of you.”

“...Hard to imagine.”

He apathetically watched Luna and Felicia engage in a fierce duel with tongs.

“I know she doesn’t act like it, but I think she really cares about you.” Nayuki peeked at his face playfully. “Hey. Rintarou? How do you feel about Luna?”

“.....”

For some reason or other, Rintarou had gone silent.

What did he think about her? The question wasn’t all that weird.

Between boys and girls of their age, this topic seemed to be a crowd favorite.

It was a little strange coming from Nayuki...but there wasn’t anything odd about the question, especially since he spent so much time with Luna at school.

That was why he probed deeper than that.

“You’ve been interested in my relationship with Luna since we met... Why?”

“Huh?”

Did he say something he shouldn’t have?

Nayuki’s hand froze over the grill.

“It’s like...you’re more interested in me than her... Why? Have we met somewhere before?”

“U-um...” She paused for some reason.

Tap, tap, tap. A girl with a petite frame trotted over to Rintarou.

Emma with her platinum blonde hair.

“Oh, thanks for manning the grill!” She bowed to them. “S-sorry for not pitching in...! I got held up by Sir Kay...”

Emma turned around with a pained smile, looking over at Sir Kay, who was hugging one of the trees, passed out.

That knight...

He made a mental note to take her picture later.

Rintarou shrugged at Emma. “No worries. You won’t catch me complaining about cooking.”

“Ha-ha. I’m sorry! ...Oh! How about this? I’ll make it up to you right now by cooking for you!” she proposed.

If she had a tail, it would have been wagging in full force... He could tell just from her expression.

“Yeah? I’ll take you up on that. Ha-ha. I was just feeling hungry.”

“Leave it to me!” Emma’s entire face lit up. “I’ll take over, Nayuki. Is that okay?”

“Oh, okay... Yeah. Go ahead, Emma.”

Nayuki offered the tiniest smile, hiding a plate of cooked meat behind her back.

"Hmm? What's wrong?" Rintarou asked. "What did you just hide?"

"Huh? Er... Nothing! Just my plate. Yeah. Ah-ha-ha."

"Oh. It looked like a lot... I never would have pegged you for a big eater."

"Don't be rude, Rintarou!" Emma scolded. "Girls eat, too, you know."

"R-right. My bad." Rintarou shrugged at Nayuki, who was smiling as usual.

"Okay, Emma. I trust you'll do a great job... Make it good," she said.

"You can count on me! How do you like your meat done, master?"

"Um. Medium."

Emma grilled his portion like a pro.

"Hee-hee. How is it? Is it the way you like it?"

"Perfection. Wow, this is good...especially paired with soy sauce and grated radish."

Rintarou devoured the plate prepared by Emma.

"....." Nayuki observed their intimate exchange.

"Ha! I knew you'd try pulling that, Emma!"

They could practically feel Luna's looming presence when she stood imposingly before them.

"Geez...Luna...," Rintarou groaned.

"Earning brownie points by grilling and serving food to him, huh...? You have no shame, maid!"

"Th-that's not...! I—I wasn't trying to...!" Emma grew animated when this ridiculous accusation was leveraged against her.

"Hmph! It's pointless! Rintarou and I are vassal and king! A flirty servant would never sever our bond! I'll prove that to you now!"

Fwoosh! Luna raised a large plate over her head.

"Watch this!"

Something was wrapped in a conical piece of aluminum foil.

Oh yeah, I forgot about that thing in the corner of the grill... I was really trying to ignore it, since I got a bad vibe from it, Rintarou remembered, unimpressed.

"This is a banquet in honor of Rintarou's services! For that occasion, I have been grilling the best meal for him as his king! Feast your eyes on this!" she declared, full of confidence.

Luna tore away the foil to reveal...

"A grilled tuna head!"

"Overkill much?!" Rintarou and Emma shouted.

THUD! The gigantic tuna head made their eyes go wide.

"Ha! Shocked? You'd need a reservation to order this at a restaurant! A delicacy (allegedly)! What do you think?! You give up yet?!"

"Well, I know it's supposed to be good! But..."

Rintarou met its Ping-Pong-sized eyes.

Its gnarly severed head served whole...was indefensibly vile.

"Why do you always choose the grossest meals?! And...it smells burnt! Hey, are you sure you didn't completely fail?!"

"Oh, you're so picky. Just eat it! After all the time I spent cooking it...!"

"Hragh! Like I could stomach that!"

In defense of the slander against grilled tuna heads, he would have found it delicious if it had been prepared by a real chef.

This commenced a game of tag. Holding the "delicacy," Luna was it, while Rintarou desperately sprinted away from her.

"M-master! You prefer my meal over Luna's failure, right?!"

Emma tossed her hat into the ring. Total chaos ensued.

"Hee-hee..." Nayuki broke out into a warm smile.

There was a hint of loneliness touching her face, but her gaze remained warm and gentle as she beheld Rintarou in the distance.

The party continued.

The chaotic barbecue wrapped up when everyone was full.

After the fire died down and the garden was spotless, they gathered in the living room of Logres Manor.

Their first activity of the evening was the standard console party game *Dopokan*. The winner was the player with the most property in the end. It was an infamous dice-based RPG known for ending friendships.

The console was three generations behind. They plugged it into the giant LCD screen with bated breath, grabbing their controllers and lining up in front of the television...

"AAAAAAAH?! Luna got me—*again*?!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You picked the suckiest character, Rintarou!"

Rintarou clutched his head as Luna roared with laughter.

"Ugh... I'm the poorest one...! Why do I have to be poor even in a video game?! I just want money... I can't even buy any items...!"

"Felicia! Monsters incoming! I'll come to save—Ah?! Did I just die?! Am I a failure as a knight?!"

Felicia had tears in her eyes. Sir Gawain hadn't shown a single good side to him.

"Hey...! Why do I have all the joke equipment? Excuse me?"

For some reason, Sir Kay's on-screen character had ended up in a bunny girl costume...

"Dammit! Luna! Could you stop killing players?! I can tell you're targeting me!" Rintarou barked.

"Ha! Someone's a sore loser! I wonder what I can take from your dead character. Equipment? Money? Everything owned by a vassal is the king's property. As is everything owned by a king—"

Luna dragged the cursor on the screen, rooting through Rintarou's items.

"...*Magma Fire*." Someone pressed a button.

BAM!

EMMA USED MAGMA FIRE!

LUNA LOST 856 HP! GAME OVER!

"AAAAAAAH?! Emma! What do you think you're doing?!"

"Hee-hee. Love a good long-range spell. ♪ Especially to torment other players. ♪ "

"H-hey, Emma...? You're acting kind of weird..."

"Hee-hee...The massacre starts...now... ♪ "

"Emma, don't go to the dark side!"

"Hee-hee-hee! Magma Fire. Magma Fire. Magma Fire..."

"Aaaah?!"

"Nooo!"

Emma's eyes had gone out of focus. It seemed something had awakened within her.

"Dammit! I'll never forgive any of you!" Rintarou howled.

"Ha-ha-ha. Chill out, Rintarou. It's just a game... Oh, look! I earned another five hundred thousand G from a special event... Sorry..."

Nayuki seemed to be the only one leveling up as an actual fight threatened to break out next to her.

Once they grew tired of playing video games, they moved on to a board game next.

Luna proposed a horror TRPG about divine creatures fighting against humanity to get vengeance. Everyone immediately got to work on their character sheets...

"—I'm not done yet!" Rintarou shouted. "I can dodge with an eighty percent success rate! And even if I fail, I can survive as long as I don't get blindsided...! I'm going to roll!"

100 (FATAL FAILURE)

"WHAT?! Why?!"

"Um... It says you failed to get away, which means you take damage..."
Nayuki explained.

"Bweh-heh-heh! You're out, Rintarou!" Luna clutched her stomach, howling with laughter.

As the game master, Nayuki seemed apologetic as Rintarou crumpled his character sheet in a fit.

"After you went through all that trouble to find a loophole *and* made your character with high stats! I can't believe you'd lose without a fight! Ha! Hee-hee-hee-hee!"

"Shut up! You try rolling the dice to escape! I bet you're seconds away from instant death!"

"Ha! As if! You think the odds are stacked against me? I'll show you how it's done! I'm going to roll!"

100 (FATAL FAILURE)

"Nooooooooo! How could I die?!" Luna shrieked.

"Gweh-heh-heh-heh-heh! Serves you right, my king!"

"Oh, shut up! Says the one who's dead, too! You—"

"Ha! You're so naive, Luna! Hey, Emma, it's your turn! You got this!"

"You can count on me, master! I use *Emergency Treatment* on you! It's my turn to roll!"

"Hey! No fair! Did she only save you?!"

"That's right! My HP is full again! Ha-ha-ha! You're the only one who's going to be dead, Lu—"

100 (FATAL FAILURE)

"WHAT?!" screeched Rintarou.

"Gweh-heh-heh-heh-heh! Sucks to suck!"

"I-I'm so sorry! Sorry, master!"

Rintarou, Luna, and Emma had rolled the dice.

"...Uhhh... I guess this game is basically over?" Felicia asked.

"I mean, we did lose two people straight off the bat...", grumbled Sir Gawain.

They looked like they'd completely given up.

"H-hey, guys? Can someone come help my character? I haven't been able to move away from this tentacle... Um... My character's clothes are starting to melt... And I haven't been able to roll the right number to escape... I could die from embarrassment... P-put me out of my misery!"

...Even in a tabletop game, Sir Kay was in her usual predicament.

They were starting to lose track of time.

With chips and drinks within arm's reach, they went through rounds of board games and cards.

They even fired up the karaoke machine, and after that, they played billiards, darts, and mahjong, which were already set up in the manor's playroom.

They gamed hard.

"...Oh... I guess I won? Um... How many points did I earn? I don't really understand how mahjong works yet..."

"*EXCUSE ME?! Did you score *tenhou*? You're joking!*" Rintarou cried out.

"Nayuki, you absolute monster!" Luna yowled.

"Huh? ...What? Is this good?"

"Hey, Luna... What are you going to do? This *is* strip mahjong. I'm barely in the game...but you just lost everything," Rintarou noted.

"Grrr! A girl doesn't go back on her word! Fine! I'll strip—"

"Please!" Sir Kay pleaded. "You're already down to your underwear! If you—"

They were all engrossed in the game. Their moods swung violently from joy to sorrow with each victory and loss. Time seemed to fly.

"Ha-ha-ha... I'm exhausted..."

They had gathered in the lounge, settling down, flopping onto the sofa to take a breather.

"Whew... I think I played enough games to last a lifetime," Felicia said, sounding pooped.

"Hah... Agree." Sir Gawain offered a wry smile.

"Heh-heh-heh! The banquet was a huge success! You're welcome to thank me!" Luna demanded, thrusting out her chest and bursting with energy.

"A success? I guess... I'm totally drained..." Sir Kay sighed.

"It's almost midnight..."

"Thank goodness we have the day off tomorrow," Felicia muttered, gazing at the wall clock.

Luna nodded.

"Um... Can I really stay the night?" Nayuki asked, hesitant.

"Uh-huh! It's too late in the evening to head home. Plus, this mansion has way too many rooms! Sleep over!" Luna cried.

Luna, Rintarou, Sir Kay, Felicia, Sir Gawain, and Emma were all living in Logres Manor. One extra person wasn't enough to make a difference.

"Thank you, Luna. I'll take you up on your offer." Nayuki grinned when Luna reaffirmed that she was welcome to stay.

"Um... I could eat again," Luna admitted out of nowhere.

"Geez..." Sir Kay sighed. "Says the one who devoured her lunch... But I guess I'm not one to judge, since I'm a little hungry, too."

They had finished eating at the barbecue at noon.

Even though they had handfuls of chips and candy to tide them over, they had been locked in an intense gaming session until midnight. They didn't have actual dinner.

It wasn't strange that they would become hungry.

"Well... I'm not *super* hungry..." Luna admitted.

"But I could eat something light..." Felicia said.

"In that case, I could whip something up?" Emma proposed. "I think we still have some pasta left. And there's extra food in the fridge... How about some pasta salad?"

"Yum! You never let me down, maid! Could you get to it right now?"

"Count on me... Um, I wish you'd stop calling me your maid..." she grumbled, smiling superficially before trudging to the kitchen.

"Rintarou! We're having pasta salad! Are you okay with that?!" Luna turned around. "H-hmm? Rintarou?"

It seemed he had slipped out of the room at some point.

Under the moonless sky, he could smell the night air carried by a chilly breeze.

He looked up at the sky, velvet and sprinkled with stars like grains of white sand. The panoramic view made him feel like he was free-falling through the sky.

The night air started to siphon the heat off his skin, numbing his body.

He was on the rooftop of Logres Manor.

On top of the sloped roof, Rintarou folded his hands behind his head, crossing his legs as he lay down.

"....." He was looking up at the sky.

I guess you can never predict the future... To think I'd be surrounded by people...

He couldn't believe his current situation. In fact, it seemed more unbelievable with each passing moment.

It wasn't a bad feeling... He was just really confused.

Up until now, I've always...

He suddenly let his eyes close, viewing a scene from his past life play out.

"If I'm human...and if you're human, how can we be this different?"

"Monster! You're not like us. You're not human."

"I...wish you'd never been born...!"

Everyone begrudged...ostracized...feared...rejected him.

He had been lonely...for the longest time. And it had caused him to lose faith in humanity.

In fact, he was going to reject the world before they rejected him.

He had entered the King Arthur Succession Battle hoping to get some enjoyment out of his boring life. That had been his only motivation.

He had done it just for fun.

I need to remember that everyone else is just another pawn for my enjoyment. They're replaceable. Consumable... That's what I thought at first...

But now?

He thought about the short time that he'd been with Luna, Sir Kay, Felicia, Sir Gawain, and Emma...about the battles they had struggled through together.

Were they still just convenient pawns? Were they really replaceable?

Obviously, they're not perfect. Luna will always be...Luna. Felicia is an enemy... And Gawain destroyed the Round Table... I never would have thought about them twice.

Luna would always be Luna. And Felicia could be respectable and mushy. Sir Gawain seemed to regret his past actions, working to right his wrongs.

Could he work his pawns to the bone when it came down to it?

Would he really be able to replace them at the drop of a hat when they served him no further utility?

...Obviously...! Rintarou insisted, trying to convince himself. That's what I decided for myself! No one in this world needs me! And I don't need anyone...!

Then why was he still thinking about their shenanigans from the day? Why were they stuck in his head?

In the middle of his memories...was Luna, whose smile warmed him up like the summer sun.

"Dammit... Why do I feel fuzzy...? I can't get my head to focus." He sighed.

Luna Artur. Everything is her fault... Who is she?

He'd never met someone so perplexing and ridiculous. He couldn't seem to get a grip on her.

He wouldn't deny his interest in Luna.

Luna had to be the biggest loser out of all the Kings fighting in the battle for the throne.

If she became the successor...all hell would break loose.

Out of curiosity, he had decided to help her. But this was still part of his plan to make her his pawn. At the end of the day, it was all for himself.

So what if I'm egotistical? I was going to play dirty with this new pawn... And what about it? That's always been my MO... So why am I having second thoughts?

...He didn't have an answer for himself.

Rintarou couldn't get a grasp on this mysterious feeling.

This was a first for him. He was used to understanding everything about the world. He had taken it for granted.

"...Damn..." he cursed, sighing...when the dormer window below him clanked open.

Someone leaned over the ledge, scanning the roof.

"Oh, Rintarou... There you are."

Luna.

She reached her hand to touch the pitched roof of the window, looking up at him.

"Hey, can I come up, too?"

"...I don't care," Rintarou replied curtly, feeling a little awkward since he'd just been thinking about her.

Luna climbed onto the sloped roof, plopping down next to him. "What are you doing up here?"

"...Nothing."

"Okay."

Their conversation was short.

They gazed up at the sky in silence.

On a hill to the east of Area Three, the manor had few neighbors, making artificial lighting scant. Instead, the vast, starry sky glowed against the dark cover of night.

"...Hey, Rintarou. Did you have fun today?"

"Yeah."

A lie.

This wasn't the *only* day he'd had fun.

"Ha-ha-ha. Good! I'm glad I put in the work to pull off this party!" Luna beamed, unaware of his actual thoughts.

"Oh yeah... Isn't it your birthday, Rintarou?"

"...?" He cocked his head when she pointed that out. "I don't remember telling you that."

"As your kind king, I have a present for you, my beloved vassal! Can I get a 'thank you'?"

Luna didn't answer Rintarou's question; instead, she pulled something out of her chest pocket and handed it to him.

"Hmm...? What is this...?" He turned it over in his hand, raising it to his narrowed eyes.

It was a pendant of a Celtic cross made from Japanese hawthorn.

Those trees had been sacred to the druid priests.

It had the power to bond people, and the Celtic cross suggested *eternal strength*.

"Heh! I made it myself! To strengthen our friendship, Rintarou. Even if we're separated, we'll reunite as long as you have this pendant... There's no better gift for a vassal! Do you like it?"

"So...this is basically a collar. It feels like...you'll never let me escape..."

"Heh! My royal motto is to welcome all who come to me...and to chase anyone who dares leave to the pits of hell."

"Wait. Why haven't I ever heard this motto before?"

Well. Whatever.

He had no need to snub this gift. Rintarou chose to keep it.

"Put it on! That's a royal order!"

"All right. All right, already." Rintarou reluctantly slipped the silver chain around his neck. "...I never knew you knew any nature spells from the Celts..."

He impassively looked at the hawthorn cross hanging from his neck.

Well, it wasn't really a spell. More like a good luck charm...



"I didn't think your generation would know something so obscure..."

"...Hmm?"

He suddenly had a flash of inspiration.

This Celtic pendant...prodded a forgotten memory deep within him.

Have I...seen this...before somewhere...?

When had that been? And where?

I remember we were parting ways... And I made this for them as a joke so they would stop whining... I think I remember...giving it to them?

With the pendant as his lens, he tried to part through the fog that obstructed his memory.

"...Did you remember something, Rintarou?" Luna asked mischievously.

She was looking at him expectantly.

"...This is..."

The mist in his mind was starting to clear...slowly...and the door to his childhood memories was about to creak open...

CRASH! A great noise rang out.

"Huh?!"

"...What?!"

Rintarou quickly sat up. Luna spun around.

With Logres Manor as the epicenter, the night air started to freeze over.

They were familiar with this feeling. It was the atmosphere of a battlefield.

The intimate vibe had vanished.

"Tch... Which troglodyte is it now...?" Rintarou grumbled, hoisting himself to his feet. "Let's go, Luna."

"...Um... Coming!"

This marked the abrupt end of their carefree day.

Once again, they were sucked back into the King Arthur Succession Battle.

CHAPTER 3

The Raid

The troglodytes in question had already infiltrated the manor, entering the front garden.

“Hmm. Is this Luna Artur’s base, Elaine?”

One of them was Hitoshi Kataoka.

“That’s right, Master Hitoshi.”

One was Elaine—Morgan le Fay—following Hitoshi like a shadow.

“.....”

And then there was Sir Tristan, watching the two from afar and looking awfully disinterested.

The three did not try to run or hide; instead, they stood in the middle of the garden.

“...Can I help you? ...Well, I guess I don’t even need to ask,” Luna addressed the intruders from a dozen feet away.

Rintarou, Sir Kay, Felicia, and Sir Gawain were lined up behind her.

They had left Emma and Nayuki in the manor. The former had lost her Excalibur when she was robbed of her position as King, and the latter was a civilian.

An Excalibur granted physical strength to their holder. Special powers depended on the Excalibur, but in the official owner’s hands, it basically guaranteed a basic boost for attacks, speed, and stamina.

Paired with *Mana Acceleration*, a modern human could fight like a knight from the ancient era. Without her Excalibur, it was too dangerous for Emma to engage in combat. The one and only exception to the rule was Rintarou Magami.

“I’m Hitoshi Kataoka—a King fighting in the battle for the throne. I came here to defeat you.” His burning gaze pierced Luna. “I heard what happened. I can’t let your foul deeds go any further! No one like you is fit to become king! As the righteous ruler, I will put you where you belong!”

“Um... What am I in trouble for?” Luna furrowed her brows, looking a little lost.

This *was* the King Arthur Succession Battle. She obviously wasn’t reluctant to fight other Kings.

After all, the winner was the last person standing—battle-royale style. She was prepared to crush her opponents and knew they all had their reasons to fight.

“Choosing to play dumb? Fine! I have nothing to say to criminals like you!”

But it was a little concerning to see someone acting hostile for no discernible reason.

"....." Rintarou scanned Hitoshi up and down.

The kid seemed drunk off his confidence.

...Hmm? Who is this brat? All talk and no action. Rintarou couldn't detect any signs of a strong Aura, and he seemed to reek of mediocrity.

Even the boosts from his Excalibur seemed decidedly average.

It wouldn't be hard to kill him. Even a rock would do it.

What's that cloth package on that chump's back...? His Excalibur? That's why he must be so confident.

Rintarou passed his eyes over the girl standing next to Hitoshi.

Luna called out to him. "Hey, Rintarou... Isn't that girl...?"

"Uh-huh. Still alive, huh...?"

Beauty concealed under a black robe, the girl that Hitoshi had called Elaine was the same one who had created fissures all over the international city of Avalonia.

At the time, Rintarou had thought Sir Lamorak had too easy of a time slitting the girl's throat... And it seemed he'd been right. It must have been a magic mirage. If that was the case, Sir Lamorak should have seen through the illusion, which basically supported their working theory that the two had been conspiring together behind the scenes.

In other words, this girl had to be the mastermind who had placed the *Curse of a Changed Heart* on Emma.

"Elaine. Step back. It's dangerous out here. Leave the rest to us."

"But I want to battle with you, Master Hitoshi!"

"I get it... But don't worry. I'll protect you..."

"Oh, Master Hitoshi... I don't deserve that..."

This time, she was hanging around some nobody, flirting with him...

Something smells fishy... Real fishy...

He had a gut feeling she had been involved with Souma Gloria Kujou, too. That would explain why Mr. Kujou had been at the center of strange phenomena—from the students-turned-puppets to the parallel world designed to look like Camlann Hill.

What was she hoping to achieve by exploiting this battle?

I only know one thing... We absolutely need to eliminate her.

She must have felt the hostility radiating off him.

"...Hee-hee," giggled Elaine—Morgan—entwining herself around Hitoshi.

To provoke Rintarou, she was trying to get Hitoshi's attention by smiling at him.

Ew... I know she's trouble...but we need to watch out for... He trailed off, glancing at the Jack who stood behind Hitoshi.

Blond hair. Blue armor. A knight who was blindingly hot. Sir Tristan.

Geez... The last of the three strongest knights of the Round Table... Never imagined he would be next...! Rintarou gnashed his teeth, fixing his eyes on Sir Tristan.

"To think we have to face him...!" Sir Kay shouted.

"Why...? Oh, why does this always happen to us...?"

Sir Kay and Sir Gawain already seemed beat.

They had gotten a firsthand view of Sir Tristan in the ancient era. And they'd had it with him.

"....." Sir Tristan himself didn't look like he wanted to fight.

He glanced at his old acquaintances and offered no reaction.

"Rintarou, what's wrong? Do you know...that Jack?" Luna asked.

"Yeah, Tristan. Ring a bell?"

Luna gulped, scrunching her face.

Sir Tristan's fame was close to that of Sir Lancelot, while Sir Lamorak hadn't made a name for herself after she went AWOL.

Luna must have been familiar with him.

"...What do we do now, Rintarou?" she asked, looking nervous.

"The brat is nothing. But the witch in black and Sir Tristan are going to be a handful," he explained. "I'll stop Sir Tristan. Sir Kay, Gawain, and Felicia...hold back that witch. You don't have to beat her."

Rintarou looked at Luna. "Take care of the brat. If you get him, Sir Tristan will disappear. Or destroy his Round Fragment. I know you're too soft for this shit."

"...Got it."

Upon wrapping up their little strategy meeting, they drew their swords and readied themselves.

"Hmm? Is your plan all in order? It won't change our victory."

Hitoshi was composed as he stood straight and tall. He seemed confident.

"...Hmph." Sir Tristan slowly raised his bow and arrow...

"Let's commence this fight for justice! To determine who will be king!" Hitoshi commanded, certain of his win.

This marked the start of their battle.

"Tch!" Rintarou sprinted ahead, taking the lead and unsheathing his favorite pair of swords—a red blade and a white one.

He barreled toward Sir Tristan, making his attack direct and immediate. He moved like a flash of lightning zipping through the air.

"That was fast!" Sir Gawain exclaimed in astonishment.

"Go get 'em, Rintarou!" Sir Kay cheered, admiring Rintarou's speed.

He was just about to plunge his swords into Sir Tristan's chest...

"...Hmph." The knight suddenly made his move.

With the bow in his left hand and the arrow in his right, he let his arms glide into place.

In an instant, Sir Tristan had an arrow nocked in his bow, and he sent it whizzing toward his opponent. He moved faster than a fast draw of a pistol by a seasoned professional.

Light trailed off the arrow, signaling that it was charged by Aura.

Its path was like a shooting star, arching to assault Rintarou from the side as he raced in a straight line for Sir Tristan. That trajectory would have been impossible for a normal arrow.

"Aaaaaaaaaaaaaah!" Rintarou sliced the arrow with his right sword as if he had predicted this would happen.

The arrow whizzed back, piercing the ground...and detonating like dynamite.

The wind whipped around them, pushing away Luna's team as it exploded in every direction.

"R-Rintarou?!"

"Don't worry about me! Go, go, go!"

Sir Tristan had fired another arrow in that time.

Just what kind of skills did he have to account for his speed? Sir Tristan had shot four arrows in a single breath.

The fatal projectiles curved and zigzagged, moving unpredictably and individually. There was no way they were normal arrows.

"I've heard about your Buffer Bow!" Rintarou barked without slowing, striking down the incoming shots.

With each arrow came an impressive explosion that ruined the topology of the front garden.

The Buffer Bow—Sir Tristan's illusory artifact weapon.

Any arrow shot from the bow would always hit its mark unless it was physically whacked away.

He had perfect aim. He was proud of that. This pride was channeled into his bow, making it a magic weapon.

"Impressive! You're the only one from the Round Table who'd be able to turn your own weapon into an artifact, Tristan!" Rintarou fended off an arrow with crossed swords, picking up his pace.

He was a storm. Sir Tristan's arrows were getting caught in this typhoon.

"Don't go thinking these arrows have anything on me!"

"Uh-huh... This is just the beginning."

In Sir Tristan's hand, the arrow burst into bits of mana...and he finally drew his sword.

"I doubt you can handle my sword when you can't even defeat my bow."

...It's go time...! Rintarou thought, curling his lips into a smile as he closed the distance between them.

Sir Tristan wasn't feared for the masterful wielding of his bow.

He hunted for sport. This was just a little hobby.

He terrorized the people with the power of the gods of war—his divine brawn.

His strength had been celebrated as the greatest of the Round Table, and his sword packed a powerful punch. Despite his delicate looks, Sir Tristan was someone who relied on raw power.

Sir Lancelot had technique, Sir Lamorak had defense, and Sir Tristan had strength, making up the three strongest knights of the Round Table.

...*What to do?!*

Half a moment later, they were one step within striking distance.

Rintarou's mind raced... That said, my options are limited!

Fomorian Transformation. At present, that was the only thing Rintarou had to face Sir Tristan.

During his fight with Sir Lamorak, his *Fomorian Transformation* had powered up considerably. And he didn't have a choice to shy away from it.

That was why Rintarou made his decision.

"I'm going full throttle! Let's do this!" He invoked the most evil and sinister power within him... "HAAAAAH!"

He was going to swing his pair of blades...

"Huh?"

"What?!"

Everyone's eyes were wide open.

All he managed to do was lash out like a normal person...and that was it.

The blades were casually stopped by Sir Tristan's sword.

"What...just happened...?"

Rintarou was the most shaken out of everyone.

He was sure he'd invoked the *Fomorian Transformation*...but he hadn't transformed.

Where was that sensation of absolute omnipotence? He could usually feel the power pulsing through him, flooding his body, but even that wasn't present.

Rintarou remained as he was.

"Rintarou?!"

"What's happening?!"

Luna and Sir Kay balked at this lack of change.

"Y-you can't be taunting them! This isn't the time to—"

"N-no, Sir Gawain! Rintarou wouldn't do that—"

He was right in front of Sir Gawain and Felicia, who were rooted to the spot.

"Is that all you got? I guess you're capable for a modern human..." Sir Tristan seemed bored, addressing him over their crossed weapons.

He gave a sweep of his sword.

THUD! Rintarou was sent flying through the air, looking like a complete joke.

"AAAAAAAHAH?!"

He was blasted sideways in the direction he had just come from, bouncing off the ground and rolling through the dirt until he started to tumble back.

"R-Rintarou! Are you okay?!"

"...Tch...?!"

Luna ran over to Rintarou, who had returned to his starting point.

"What... What's going on...?! I can't invoke Fomorian power...?!" He sat up on the ground, staring down at himself. He just couldn't believe it.

It should have come to him as naturally as breathing. But he couldn't detect any signs of it in his body.

What is this...?! When did I...?! He started to tremble.

"Ha-ha-ha. You wanna use the Fomorian power?"

"You rejected me. You want to have your cake and eat it, too."

Something was ringing in his ears. It sounded like someone whispering...

But even when he scanned his surroundings, no one was there.

And he already knew who it was.

You little! Rintarou barked in his head.

Then he heard the voice again—echoing like it scratched his brain from the inside out.

"Looks like this is going to be a close match, mate. I bet you're ready to beg me to give you access to my power..."

Cut the crap! Rintarou thought. *Stop being so greedy!*

"Says the one who abandoned his mission."

What mission...?

"Don't make me repeat myself. Your mission to kill Arthur."

Remember when I told you to stop messing with me...? Arthur is already

—

"Arthur is right there, right in front of you."

What—?

He was floored by his own cryptic comment.

"RINTAROU!"

His vision was filled by Luna's face as she peeked into his eyes.

"What's gotten into you?! You spaced out! You're not acting like yourself!"

"I-I'm..."

His companions were looking down on him, appearing anxious.

However, Rintarou didn't have an answer.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What have we got here? Someone is all spirit—and has no bite!"

Hitoshi clapped his hands with glee.

"See? That's my power. We're just not the same! Surrender if you get it! And I'll let you be one of my vassals!"

"...What a joke...!" Luna retorted, but her comeback didn't hold her usual confidence.

It might have been because of Rintarou's unusual behavior, but she was gripped by an uneasy sensation.

"Someone doesn't get it. I guess you can't see that we're cut from different cloths... Fine. See for yourself!" Hitoshi shouted, looking at his Jack. "Get them, Sir Tristan! Teach them pain!"

"...Hmph." Sir Tristan took a step forward, looking unenthused by the prospect.

"Gh..." Rintarou readied his swords, even though he shrank back a step.

"Rintarou, are you okay? Can you fight?" asked Luna, legitimately worried.

"Uh, yeah... It's...it's just..." Rintarou managed to reply. "I think it's a symptom from that other fight... I don't think I can transform..."

"...Okay."

Luna didn't blame him. She nodded gently.

"I don't like it when you use it anyway..." she admitted. "I get a bad feeling from it."

"....."

"Don't worry! We've got nothing to fear! You'll still lead us to victory... Right, Rintarou?"

"Uh, yeah... Count on me."

Just fake bravado.

Battles require fighters to quantify their strength. Courage and mental fortitude weren't part of the initial equation. They were at the bottom of priorities.

Fighting without the *Fomorian Transformation* would be a huge negative in the battle equation. That was an unshakable truth.

He had only won against Sir Lancelot and Sir Lamorak with the Fomorian power.

The strongest fighter in Luna's party was out of commission. That was unprecedented.

An even greater hellscape was about to unfold...

In the lounge of Logres Manor—

"....."

"....."

—Emma and Nayuki were idly sitting on the sofa.

It was silent, as if their racket had never happened.

Tick, tick, tick, echoed the wall clock. It sounded grating in their ears.

They could hear occasional metal clangs coming from outside.

"...Um...!" Nayuki piped up, unable to stand the silence any longer. "Um... What's going on? All I know is that they jumped outside looking serious... Did something happen?"

The anxiety on Nayuki's face was plain as day.

Emma could see that for herself. She offered a gentle smile to offer her some respite.

"It's all fine! It'll all be fine!"

"Are you sure...?"

"Um...I can't go into detail, but they're definitely fine! I mean, they have my master with them, after all! Everyone will be back in no time!"

Emma was a terrible liar. She hadn't explained a thing.

If anything, she had implied that something was up.

"....." Nayuki observed Emma...and then her eyes narrowed.

Something in Nayuki had changed.

Her gentle face turned serious. She didn't even look like herself.

".....I knew this was going on," she muttered.

"Hmm? Did you just say something?"

Nayuki stood up as though she had settled on something.

"...I need to go."

"What?!" Emma cried.

Nayuki tried to leave the room.

Emma immediately grabbed the back of her sleeve and stopped her.

"Where...are you going?!"

"To Rintarou. I must go."

"No! You can't leave! I can't explain what's going on, but it's dangerous out there!"

"But—"

"No buts! Please, Nayuki! You need to stay here and—"

THUMP. Something about the air inside the manor had changed.

"—Gh?!"

Emma realized Nayuki had vanished.

She couldn't hear the fight breaking out anymore.

Her world was dominated by the ticking of the clock.

"Is this a netherworld?!"

They had gotten her. Emma trembled.

Someone must have used *Netherworld Transformation* on Logres Manor.

Emma was cut off from the real world, locked away somewhere that bore a resemblance to her home. She was alone, trapped.

"But...why...?! Why would there be a netherworld in here...?"

Nothing could hide her surprise.

That was when she noticed something.

...There's something here...

Her sixth sense picked it up. There was...someone else with her.

It wasn't Nayuki. Emma imagined she was panicking in the real world when Emma disappeared.

She could sense the hostility coming from the other person, who was creeping toward her.

It was so obvious. The other person was targeting...

"...Me? But why...?"

She wasn't paralyzed by fear...but by their reason.

"I've already lost my Excalibur and Round Fragment... I've been robbed of everything that makes me a King... So why...? There's no point in killing me...!"

She didn't get it.

But the person who had set up this netherworld was most certainly targeting her.

...Everyone else is outside... I wonder if they'll notice this Netherworld Transformation...

The odds seemed slim.

Based on sound alone, she had been able to tell that their battle was a desperate one. It wasn't like Rintarou would notice the subtle presence of a netherworld when they were fighting for their lives. Regardless, she doubted they would make it in time.

Which meant she needed to do something herself... This wasn't the time for her to sit and panic.

"...Guh!" Emma yanked a sword off the wall.

It was there for decor, but it had practical use. The only thing was that the sword was a very mediocre one.

Compared to her Excalibur, it wasn't anything special.

But Emma knew channeling her Aura into the weapon might help. She gripped the sword, leaving the lounge behind.

Emma ran into the person in the sprawling foyer.

It appeared the intruder had purposefully projected hostility to draw in Emma, and they waited there patiently for her.

"....."

Stairs continued from the second floor to the entrance hall. Emma observed the person standing near the landing.

It was a girl wearing a black sailor school uniform and a hooded cloak.

In her hand was a dagger with a curious luster. It didn't seem like it was gold or silver. Its molding was sinister...and the blade was sharp.

It had to be an Excalibur.

"...You've come, Emma Michelle."

The girl seemed to sense her entrance, looking at Emma from the distance.

Her cold glare peeked out from her hood and behind her black hair, piercing Emma's soul.

"...Who are you?" Emma feigned composure to keep her ground.

"...Reika Tsukuyomi. A King fighting in the battle for the throne."

"Reika...huh?" Emma sucked in a deep breath, focusing on remaining calm. "I can feel murder coming off you... Are you planning on defeating me?"

"...Yeah. You're making my job easy."

"I'm not planning on begging for my life, but I assume you realize I'm not a King anymore. My defeat won't count toward the succession battle."

"...I know."

Reika was incredibly calm—merciless.

"But I have my own responsibilities. And it requires my taking your life."

"...What?!"

"I haven't got anything against you, but...I need to kill you," she said.

Reika didn't seem to need a response. She steadied the dagger, holding it with a backhand grip.

"Gh?!" Emma raised her weapon.

Her opponent was a King with an Excalibur. Which meant she had to have a Jack, too.

Meanwhile, Emma was a former King who had lost her Excalibur. And she didn't have a knight to protect her.

I hate to admit that I can't even compare to her...

But she couldn't give up.

That was a lesson she'd picked up from her master—Rintarou.

I'm still trying to find my purpose in life...ever since I was robbed of my right to be King... But I told myself that I would figure it out... I want to be with master and Luna and everyone else...! That's why—

Emma roared courage as she glared at Reika. Her opponent's coat and hair fluttered from the pressure.

"...I'm not going to lose! I hope you don't think you can get rid of me!" Emma was ready to respond to her every attack.

She was going to find a way to escape. She had no other choice.

"You've got guts. I don't think anyone from the ancient era was as sincere as you." Reika flashed her a small cold smile. "...Gh!"

She held up her dagger.

"Wha—?!" Emma's eyes went wide.

Thousands of daggers appeared above Reika's head, pointing at Emma.

"...I'll make sure you don't suffer a painful death. Die, Emma Michelle. Know it won't be in vain."

With her free hand, Reika drew a sword—an ornamental one with a white blade.

It caught the light of the chandelier, glaring ominously.

"...M-master...", Emma whimpered.

She hadn't lost her will to fight. And she hadn't fallen to her knees in despair.

This just cemented her suspicion that Reika was the better fighter.

Reika Tsukuyomi was strong.

There was no means of escape.

And if she resisted, her death would be handed to her without ceremony.

Emma was certain of this.

Silver flashes shot through the air. The daggers over Reika's head had fired like a meteor shower toward Emma Michelle.

—

"RAAAAAAAH!"

Rintarou sprinted, looking like a bolt of lightning as he whizzed across the ground.

Left. Right. Left. He launched himself to every blind spot, every opening that he spotted, zigzagging across Sir Tristan's vision.

He leaped into the air, trying to get Sir Tristan from above.

"...Hmph."

But Sir Tristan must have had a hunch, because he sent his opponent flying back with a sloppy sweep of his sword.

"Whoa?!" His body shot through the air like a ball hit by a bat. "Dammit!"

Even as he tumbled through the dirt, Sir Tristan pursued him with terrific speed. Rintarou launched off the ground, using momentum to land on his feet.

Sir Tristan's sword came crashing down, aiming to crack Rintarou's skull open.

Rintarou was in a tough spot. He had no way of protecting himself from Sir Tristan's sword anymore.

"Rintarou!"

"Nh?!"

But he was saved by a hairbreadth.

Sir Kay and Sir Gawain rushed in from the outskirts, crossing swords over his head to stop Sir Tristan.

"Ack—"

"Whoa?!"

But it wasn't enough.

Their swords were pushed down. Sir Tristan was going in for the kill.

"You...!" Rintarou boomed, jumping to his feet and slipping his sword between the cracks to join the other two. "Heh... We might—?!"

But it didn't stop Sir Tristan.

His sword was unstoppable, pressing against the lattice of blades...until he broke through.

"GAAAAAH!"

"GRAAAAH!"

"AAAAACK!"

The three fighters were blasted away like leaves at the mercy of a tropical storm.

Sir Tristan immediately chased after them—

"Dance, dance, nymphs of the flowers, dance and scatter as you bloom flowers of flames!" Felicia chanted, activating the fairy spell *Flower Fire Dance*.

A cyclone of petals swirled around Sir Tristan, catching fire and combusting his body.

But that wasn't enough. Even in the raging flames, his sword continued to swing.

And it was enough to cut through the storm, blowing the embers away.

"Gh...! What even *are* you?!"

Felicia looked at her own sword, her Excalibur in the shape of a rapier. It was the Radiant Steel Sword of Glory—and she had already declared its inscription.

The blinding light from the blade weakened enemies and invoked Sun's Blessing in Sir Gawain. Which meant it would have been effective on Sir Tristan.

Except it didn't seem to have any effect on him.

When she'd weaponized it on Sir Lancelot and Sir Lamorak, Felicia could sense that it dulled their movements. But Sir Tristan was acting like nothing had happened to him.

"No... It's working...! I'm counting on you to keep it going, Feli—*cough!*" Rintarou hacked up blood, using his swords as crutches to stand himself up.

"That's the only thing saving us!" he called out. "Without it, he would take us down...!"

"Rintarou...! I don't know how long I can keep this up...!"

"I know. It'll just get worse..."

"I'm...not blaming you or anything...but is your Fomorian power...?"

"....." He didn't answer.

Felicia's face hardened when Rintarou confirmed her suspicions.

Their original plan had been for Rintarou to hold back Sir Tristan, which left Sir Gawain, Felicia, and Sir Kay to restrain the witch in black. Luna was supposed to bring down Hitoshi.

That *had* been their plan.

But for whatever reason, Rintarou had lost his *Fomorian Transformation*.

To hold back Sir Tristan, Sir Gawain, Felicia, and Sir Kay needed to be mobilized, but that wasn't possibly enough... And that meant it would be impossible for Luna to get through to that witch in black to bring down Hitoshi.

Hitoshi Kataoka was a nobody, but this mission was too dangerous with that witch protecting him.

Rintarou knew her power was unimaginable... She made for a terrifying opponent.

His team was simply understaffed. They lacked the basics—strength and numbers.

I didn't want to count on a crappy plan, but... Rintarou glanced behind him.

Luna was standing quietly in the very back of the battlefield with her eyes closed.

Her sword was in its sheath, and her hands were at her sides. Cold sweat beaded on her forehead, and she stood wordlessly.

We'll use Luna's Steel Sword of Camaraderie to blow away that witch and kid...

It would take time, but if she could invoke it, her Excalibur could emit an ultimate attack that would blast away just about anyone.

Even magical defenses were rendered meaningless.

It could even demolish a netherworld if they decided to hide in one.

It had been impossible to use during their fight with Sir Lamorak, but it could have broken her shields if it had been successfully weaponized.

It was their prided and powerful trump card.

In fact, all they could do was bet everything on it.

Thankfully...the witch hasn't made any moves to protect the little brat... Maybe we can finish this while they continue to conceal their true powers...

Raising his swords, Rintarou faced Sir Tristan, who was walking toward him in order to corner him...

Tch... Where are Gawain and Sir Kay...?

They were in the distance, leaning on their swords to stand.

With Felicia's *Spring Wind of Abundance*, their skin was starting to regenerate, but it would take a bit longer for them to come back into battle.

Damn... I just need to focus on buying more time... Rintarou desperately tried to think of a way.

That was when something happened.

"Okay, Sir Tristan. You can stop," called out Hitoshi from the other side of his Jack. The witch in black waited on him. He looked mighty proud of himself.

Sir Tristan silently halted.

"...Oh?" Rintarou muttered.

If Hitoshi was stopping his knight...he must have wanted to talk things over. That or he was thrown off his game or was maybe even placated. Rintarou grinned, letting his mental gears whirl.

Bargaining would let him make use of his knowledge as Merlin.

Hitoshi addressed Rintarou next. "Did you see for yourself?"

"Heh. See what?"

"That we're on different fields. Obviously."

"..." Rintarou waited patiently to hear what was coming next.

But...Hitoshi just grinned from ear to ear, looking like he'd already won.

"...Hmm? ...Is that all you have to say?" Rintarou called out.

"Yeah... What about it?"

"..." Rintarou's jaw practically dropped to the floor.

...Does he have no brain cells?

Really? That was all he had to say when they were fighting with their lives on the line?

Did he really stop the battle just to say nothing?

In this situation? When he obviously had the upper hand?

This just confirmed Rintarou's assessment of the boy: Hitoshi Kataoka was a total amateur when it came to fighting.

Because Hitoshi had not the slightest hint of strength, Rintarou had suspected he was a prime negotiator who relied on brain and tact to worm through the battlefield...but that *didn't* seem to be the case.

If he had even the average amount of tact, he never would have paused the battle at *this* moment in *this* situation...for no discernible rhyme or reason.

Hitoshi Kataoka was a King who genuinely didn't have a clue.

"...Huh. Different fields?" Rintarou humored him.

It was like Hitoshi didn't know the price of extra time...to the advantage of Luna's team.

Rintarou had run out of options to buy time...when this opportunity fell in his lap.

"Yeah. I get it now. You're right. I guess you're not even in the same universe as my King."

"Told ya. I'm just glad you can understand—"

"You suck so much that you're basically on the other side of Earth."

Rintarou had hyped him up—only to shatter his ego.

Hitoshi's face dropped as soon as Rintarou provoked him.

I knew it. He's still a little brat. He wants everyone to glorify him but has no talent to show for it. He wants to be liked so badly. He's just a cringey kid going through growing pains. With a ravenous appetite for approval.

Rintarou could read him like a book.

He knew that if he picked a fight, Hitoshi would snap back. It was in his blood.

"You call yourself king? Quit pulling my leg. A talentless hack could never. A king? You'd make a better emperor—one without clothes. Go home to your mommy and suck on her tits."

"Did you just call me *talentless*...?!"

His personality couldn't take it when other people treated him like an idiot.

Hitoshi's face flushed as he jumped to his feet.

"I'm not a hack! I'm not like all the other idiots around me! I'm smarter! I-I'm special!"

"Heh. Special? Yeah, right. You're a dime a dozen."

"What?! You should just accept the truth! I'm a King! I'm different...! I'm a descendant of King Arthur! Look! Behold my power as a King! You haven't been able to lay a hand on me! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"But *you* haven't done a thing," Rintarou pointed out, which seemed to touch a nerve.

A critical hit.

"You can't do anything—can't fight, can't think, can't even make a single decision... You hide behind your knight and nod along, bending over backward to follow the woman... Wah-wah. A little baby. Are you into ageplay?"

"N-no! ...Don't mess with me! I would never...! I'm...I'm...!"

Hitoshi was on the verge of exploding in anger.

"...Pay no mind to the heckling of a boor, Master Hitoshi," the witch in black gently urged, nestling up to Hitoshi. "No matter what anyone says, you have the potential to be a king. That's why I appeared before you—to guide you..."

"Elaine..." Hitoshi seemed to be slightly satisfied by her praise.

"The people of this world are juvenile. Few can see things for their true value. All the more reason why I must protect you..."

"Right... I almost forgot... You came to me like a dream when I'd been handed a sword, at a total loss... You guided me and brought me here..."

Hitoshi glared at Rintarou like he'd regained his confidence.

"Dumbasses everywhere! You just can't accept someone who's actually special! It was like that at school, too! All those idiots looked at me like *I* was stupid! Well, I used my power as a King and sent them all to the hospital! They'll never recover! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! They had it coming for them!"

"....."

"All because they thought I was nothing... But I'm special... I'm going to become a hero... I'm meant to become one...! I'm different from human garbage like you...!"

Rintarou was honestly beat.

He's unsalvageable trash... Not like I'm one to talk.

He was starting to get genuinely irritated that Hitoshi had cornered them.

But even this meaningless drivel served a purpose.

Even though their conditions weren't perfect, Sir Gawain and Sir Kay were on their feet again.

"...Rintarou, I think I can do it."

From behind him, he heard Luna murmur quietly.

His lips curled up.

"I was waiting, my king," he said.

"Go, Sir Tristan! Kill all of them!"

"...Hmph." Sir Tristan brandished his sword and rushed at them.

"Gawain! Sir Kay! Felicia!" Rintarou yelled, facing the incoming enemy, standing in the line of fire.

"AAAAH!"

"Hragh!"

"Gah!"

Sir Gawain and Felicia flew in from both sides.

Sir Kay approached from behind.

They surrounded Sir Tristan and crashed into him.

"Hmph!"

But he repositioned himself with impressive footwork, immediately jabbing his sword to handle the attacks—driving the three fighters off, dispelling, repelling, rebuffing, and fending them off.

And even though he was on the defense, he was gradually overwhelming them and pushing back.

"Ack!" Sir Kay was the first to get critically hit, flying back, armor and all.

"Aaah!"

As Sir Tristan returned to his position, he sent Felicia's sword flying, using the momentum to get her, too.

"GAH!"

As her backup, Sir Gawain stopped Sir Tristan's sword as it came down over his head.

But the knight broke through Sir Gawain's parry, slicing through his armor, deep into his collar.

"I won't let you!" Rintarou screamed.

He aimed for Sir Tristan's neck, assaulting him violently.

Sir Tristan was one step ahead.

He drew back...which gave them the perfect window of opportunity.

"Luna! Noooooooooow!" Rintarou yelled.

"Royal Road!"

Luna snapped open her eyes and unsheathed her sword, raising it over her head.

In the next moment, light flooded out of her weapon, shooting up to the heavens to create a towering blade of light. It practically reached the clouds.

The aurora whited out their vision.

"Eek?! Wh-what is that thing?!" Hitoshi shrieked, wide-eyed and panicked, gaping at the undulating light radiating from her sword.

"You need not worry, Master Hitoshi."

At that moment, the witch in black suddenly appeared behind Luna, attempting to slit Luna's throat with a short sword.

"Not on my watch!"

Another Rintarou had appeared out of the shadows, swinging his sword to repel her.

"Gah!"

"Heh. Obviously, I would keep my eye out for *that*."

Rintarou's specialty. *Shadow Burrow* and *Silhouette*. Dark magic.

Upon completing its role, the *Silhouette* Rintarou dispersed into the air.

"*DO IT! LUNA!*"

Luna started to chant. "My Excalibur, the Steel Sword of Camaraderiie!"

The light showed no mercy as it came crashing down on Hitoshi, who was frozen by fear.

They were Kings. This was a battlefield. They had known from the start that this was a fight to the death.

Luna showed no signs of hesitating.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!"

His trembling body was completely consumed by the light of Luna's sword.

The torrent bathed everything in white. Brilliant white.

However...

"'King, hath the new Excalibur, which the Dame du Lac bequeathed to ye, been to thine liking?' asked Merlin.

"King Arthur looked on the sword as he said, 'Very much so.'

"Then Merlin asked him, 'Whether liketh you better? The sword or the scabbard?'

"'I like the sword,' said King Arthur.

“‘Ye are more unwise,’ said Merlin.

“‘For the scabbard is worth ten of the swords. Whiles ye have the scabbard upon you, ye shall never lose no blood, be ye never sore wounded. Therefore keep the scabbard always with you.’”

John Sheep,

LAST ROUND ARTHUR, FIRST VOLUME, TWENTY-FIFTH CHAPTER

...The light had settled.

“What...?”

“...Y-you’ve got to be kidding...”

All who were present were stunned.

Luna’s sword had been almighty.

The area had been obliterated from damage. It was as if a towering dragon had dragged its claws through the dirt. The earth had been gouged. The front garden had been rendered into ash.

There was value in choosing to make their primary residence in a remote location.

“Ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha,” chuckled Hitoshi.

He had fallen on his ass—unharmd.

“Impossible.”

“Wh-why...? I made sure to use all my power...”

Rintarou and Luna were in disbelief. Their eyes widened.

How had he survived? Through Luna’s Steel Sword of Camaraderie? *Unscathed?*

“Even if he used protective magic...that’s impossible...”

Even Rintarou in his *Fomorian Transformation* would have been obliterated by Luna’s Excalibur.

Did that brat actually withstand it?

Rintarou was at a complete loss.

“I—I thought I was going to die for sure, but...my Excalibur is *amazing*... I didn’t think it’d protect me from that...!”

With a hint of a tense smile forming over his lips, Hitoshi tore off the cloth package on his back with trembling hands before proudly raising its contents so the others could see.

It was a scabbard—a beautiful one—decorated with gold, silver, and precious gems.

“It’s the Steel Sheath of Undying Defense! It’s the strongest Excalibur—and it’s mine!”

“A scabbard?! Tch... I see...!”

The scabbard from the legends of King Arthur was famous by word of mouth.

Rintarou recognized the potential of Hitoshi’s Excalibur in an instant and spat out in annoyance.

“Listen closely. So long as I have this Excalibur, I will never be hurt! Neither will anyone steal it from me! You got that?!”

It seemed Hitoshi was getting so wound up, he was spilling confidential information.

Rintarou was lost in thought, ignoring him.

Tch... I never would have guessed that cheat would've been made into an Excalibur...

The scabbard rendered all attacks null—from swords, arrows, bullets, any physical assaults, magic spells, spiritual attacks, and curses of all kinds...

It explained why the amateur could be so cocky on the battlefield.

Dammit! This is so irritating, but we can't do anything about him now!

What could he do? Hitoshi didn't give Rintarou the chance to think that over.

"Is this the time to be lost in thought?"

Once again, Sir Tristan rushed at Rintarou, trying to rip into him.

"Crap!" Rintarou leaped back once and then twice before repelling Sir Tristan's attacks.

With every hit, the impact from their blades shocked his arms, zapping Rintarou's body. It wasn't long before he was sent flying.

He was nearing his limits. He felt like he was about to be defeated.

"R-Rintarou?!"

Luna had gotten to the point where she just couldn't watch anymore.

She started to run toward Rintarou, trying to come to him as backup.

"I'm coming right now!"

"Don't! Run away—"

Rintarou was ready to propose withdrawing when something happened.

"And so the Britain King Arthur ruled, and the plentiful knights of the Round Table took pride of the peak of their glory and prosperity.

"Yet, in King Arthur's heart remained some malady.

"A babe that should destroy the king should be born on May Day.'

"In times past, Nimue of the Dame du Lac slew the prophesier Merlin, and yet his prophecy stayed in the king's mind.

"But have no fear, my king, for thou hast me.

"As long as I am by thy side, thou art safe, my king.'

"Yet, Merlin was no longer with King Arthur.

"From his plight, King Arthur said, 'Let send the children born on May Day, upon pain of death for any that refuse.

"Slay each child with a dagger and leave not one alive.'

"Then he gathered all the children begotten on May Day in the realm and killed each one to leave not a single child to spare.

"The young Mordred had been among them but was spared the plight, for the ship put to sea wrecked.

"Many of the lords and subjects were displeased.

"This was the first step toward King Arthur's ruin and the collapse of the kingdom of Logres."

John Sheep,

LAST ROUND ARTHUR, FOURTH VOLUME, TWENTY-EIGHTH CHAPTER

"Luna, above you!" Rintarou shouted.

"?!" Luna looked up.

Hundreds of silver daggers had snaked around her, coming down on her like a downpour.

"Eek?!"

She had no time to escape.

Luna immediately fired her Aura and her sword in place of a shield for defense.

The blades rained down on her, ripping through her delicate frame, which bloomed with blood.

Finally, it stopped.

"Gah—hah?!"

Luna collapsed, robbed of her strength and skewered by the daggers.

She narrowly missed having fatal wounds, but she could no longer fight.

"LUUUUUUNA?!"

FWOOSH! Something came down to stand behind Luna, who remained facedown on the ground.

"Royal Road—Sword of Destruction..."

It was a girl in a hooded cloak.

In her hand, she held a curious dagger.

"Any king has a good side...and a bad one. This Excalibur embodies the latter in King Arthur. Don't hold this against me."

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Nice one! Reika Tsukuyomi! An excellent vassal! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

She ignored Hitoshi, who was in a fit of laughter.

Reika seemed like she was trying to strike the finishing blow on Luna...

She put away her dagger and unsheathed a sword—an ornamental one with a white blade.

Had she used it just earlier on someone else? Because it was dripping with blood.

"Dammit!" In fury, Rintarou launched himself at Luna like he'd exploded.

"I won't let you through."

Sir Tristan stood in his way.

"MOVE!" Rintarou tried to strike Sir Tristan.

Not that he could be hit from any slipshod attempts.

Sir Tristan lazily parried Rintarou's rapid attacks from both swords.

"Luna!"

"Gah! I'm coming to help you right now!"

Sir Kay, Felicia, and Sir Gawain dashed toward Luna.

"How rude. Leaving a girl to dance alone?" The witch in black snapped her fingers.

SLRP, SLRP, SLRP... The ground melted into an inky swamp. The three of them started to sink. Hands shot up from the murky waters, pulling them down into the depths...

"Crap...! This again?!"

"Aaah! It's just an illusion... It's just an illusion...!"

It was incredibly strong magic.

And even though they resisted, they couldn't break the illusion, all attempts thwarted by the witch.

"Dammit...!"

As he observed his other teammates, Rintarou channeled his power into his attacks, trying to slice through Sir Tristan.

"I said *move!*"

But the knight didn't budge an inch. It was almost as though he were a rampart.

Crap! I might still make it! I need my Fomorian Transformation! That's all I have! Dammit! Give it to me! Rintarou howled in his mind.

But not even the slightest bit of power was activated. He didn't even hear the voice anymore.

What is with you?

Eventually, Sir Tristan fended off Rintarou's stormy assault and returned a blow like a battering ram.

"GAH?!"

CLANG! Rintarou narrowly protected himself with his swords' hilts, blown away in the opposite direction of Luna.

As he lay helpless, Reika stood next to Luna and looked down on her.

"Ugh... Uh... Rin...ta...rou..."

Luna still tried to reach out a trembling hand to pick up her fallen sword.

But Reika kicked it away.

"...Ugh..." Her eyes flooded with despair.

"If you want to hate me, go for it," Reika dispassionately and coldly told Luna, announcing her death sentence. "Your death will not be in vain."

She plunged her white sword into Luna's back.

"GAAAAAH?!"

"LUNAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!" Rintarou's eyes nearly bulged from their sockets.

He knew with his sixth sense that the white sword was drawing something out of Luna—lethally draining her.

The white sword burned red as it drew the substance out.

"...Ah..."

Luna was weakening before his eyes.

"No...! Lu...na..." As her spiritual companion, Sir Kay was beginning to fade, fingertips decomposing into particles of mana.

She looked down in disbelief... She was disappearing.

"Noooooooo! Luna, please!!"

"Crap! Move out of the way!"

Felicia and Sir Gawain struggled wildly, but it was all to no avail.

“AAAAAAAAAH!”

Rintarou tried to do something to overcome Sir Tristan.

But it was impossible.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Told ya. I’m stronger! I’m going to become the hero! I’m going to become the true king! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Hitoshi’s ear-piercing cackle echoed.

They made to snuff out Luna’s life as one would a candle flame.

That was exactly when it happened.

All of a sudden, something ruptured in the air behind Reika.

“I won’t let you!”

A girl came swooping down on Reika.

In her hand, she held a sword made from ice.

The air froze over as she brandished her weapon, scattering diamond dust in its wake.

“Tch—”

Reika immediately yanked her white sword out of Luna and leaped away.

The ice sword sliced through the air. A shallow wound opened along Reika’s cheek.

The cut instantly froze, not spilling even a drop of blood.

The girl then exuded incredible mana.

“—*Winter Storm.*”

Fwsht! A chilly tempest blasted into Reika and the witch in black.

“...Tch!”

“...What kind of mana...?!”

They sprinted from its range as it froze the blood in their bodies.

Felicia and Sir Gawain were released from the illusion.

“I won’t let you kill Luna.”

As though to protect Luna, the girl stood in front of her, wielding her ice blade.

She was...

“...Nayuki?!”

...Nayuki Fuyuse.

Something about her was completely different from her usual self.

Even though she had Nayuki’s face, her hair had turned a frosty blue. Her eyes were icy, like jewels.

He had no idea when she had changed, but she was no longer wearing her school uniform, donning an ultrathin white-and-blue dress in its place. Her modest accessories were aglow with curious magic.

Coupled with her ephemeral bearing, she could have been mistaken for an ice fairy.

“Tch...*you again,*” Reika muttered resentfully. “I can’t believe you got in the way earlier...which is why *I couldn’t draw it out.*”

“.....”

"And I can't believe you got out of that netherworld... Above and beyond my expectations," Reika spat.

Rintarou and the others' vision started to shift.

"I-is this...a Netherworld Transformation...?!"

"It's mine, Rintarou. I banished them from this world." Nayuki turned to him. "We need to withdraw now."

"N-Nayuki... What are you...?"

"We can talk later. Even though I've separated us with the *Netherworld Transformation*, it won't buy us much time as long as that witch is around."

She was right.

Rintarou gritted his teeth as he picked up Luna's battered body.

She was still breathing. It was a whisper of a breath, but she was alive.

Rintarou was bewildered by how immensely relieved he felt...

He glared at Hitoshi's group as they disappeared into the warping landscape.

"I'll remember this...! Don't think your death will be painless...!" he threatened.

"Eep?!" Hitoshi trembled, shrinking back a step. "Ha. Ha-ha. Sore losers just love to blame the game..."

Rintarou turned to Reika, ignoring him.

"Reika, huh...? That white sword... *I see what's happening.*"

"Ha... Great guess, *Merlin.*"

He gnashed his teeth, glaring angrily at her. "A hundred years since I've seen you... I'll get you next time... You're mine."

"Ditto. I'll kill you with my own two hands."

Was it fate?

"I will purge you, Merlin. Even if it's just you..."

Rintarou and Reika gave each other death glares.

The tension was palpable.

Hitoshi, Reika, and the rest of his group disappeared into the wavering air.

And it was like all their worries were gone. They sank to the ground, knowing they were saved.

"...Rintarou..." Nayuki seemed apologetic. "Well...I don't want to say this...and I know it'll be hard..."

"...Yeah, I know."

Rintarou repressed every emotion in him and once again picked up Luna's limp form.

He turned to the others. "They'll come right back... We're abandoning this place... We can escape to safety."

"....."

The silence felt heavy.

Scrinch... His bones creaked as he curled his hand into a fist.

His nails broke through his skin, making his blood trickle down his palm.

CHAPTER 4

Intermission—Individual Motives

They had safely abandoned Logres Manor.

Their hideout of choice was Camelot International High School.

Midnight. They had the next day off.

The campus grounds were a suitable establishment for a holding fort.

With his magic, Rintarou had cast a *Netherworld Transformation*, breaking the school off from the real world.

The Neverwhere projected an image of the school building.

They were gathered in the nurse's office. Lying on the two beds were two girls, sound asleep.

Luna and Emma.

"I can't believe...they got to Emma, too...," Felicia said, sounding distressed as she gazed at her in bed.

She looked terrible. Drained of blood, her pale face made her look corpse-like.

From her tattered and bloody uniform, they could only guess she faced a punishing plight.

Nayuki sounded apologetic. "I managed to get through the boundary to the netherworld in the manor, but the enemy had already gotten to Emma by the time I reached her...and she'd stabbed her with a white blade..."

"If I remember correctly...she goes by Reika Tsukuyomi, right?" Felicia asked.

She nodded.

Reika Tsukuyomi.

The girl responsible for Emma's critical condition.

"When I tried to use magic to save Emma, Reika immediately abandoned the netherworld. Emma was barely breathing. And I tried to use my healing magic, but..."

"...Even though her wounds closed up on the surface, her spirit wasn't the same... Am I getting this right?" Rintarou asked solemnly.

Felicia, Sir Gawain, and Nayuki gazed at him from behind.

He was focused on the bed in front of him...where Luna was sleeping.

Like Emma, her face was ghostly white. She looked like she was knocking on death's door.

"Same thing happened to Luna. We took care of her wounds...but she's still *dying*," he muttered.

His eyes were hollow... Something dark boiled in them.

"She's clinging to life by an unraveling thread... She doesn't have much time... They'll die if we don't do anything."

He had voiced their collective thoughts.

They held their breath, letting the silence wash over them.

"Wh-what is going on?! Why can't we heal them?!"

It didn't take long before Felicia let out a panicked cry, lips trembling.

"That white sword...might be Reika's Excalibur," Sir Gawain guessed, forehead breaking into a sweat.

"Her power must be...to steal someone's spirit..." Felicia concluded.

"There's no way!" Sir Gawain refuted. "Reika's Excalibur is the Sword of Destruction! Kings can wield only one Excalibur! Which means that white sword isn't one!"

"B-but...it's hard to believe a modern magic sword would wield so much power... If Reika Tsukuyomi is a King and if her white sword isn't an Excalibur—"

They continued to argue among themselves.

"...He's right. It isn't an Excalibur..." Rintarou muttered almost inaudibly. "And that sword...steals the blood of kings."

"What...?"

"Do you know about it, Rintarou?"

"....." He turned to Nayuki. "Hey, Nayuki. Who are you? What's with that getup?"

He looked her up and down.

They were used to seeing her look categorically ordinary. But she seemed like a completely different person now. Her beauty sent shivers up their spines.

"I think you already know, Rintarou..." She sighed defeatedly, then gave him a sad smile. "...I'm part of the Dame du Lac...or at least, I used to be..."

Felicia and Sir Gawain accepted her confession immediately.

The Dame du Lac were half human and half fey, masters of witchcraft, bearers of concentrated mana.

It explained Nayuki's powers.

"Hmph... I see."

Rintarou's tone started to take on a hint of disgust when he heard who she was.

"And? What business does a former Dame du Lac have with us? Why be friendly with us by pretending to be a civilian? I bet you controlled some minds with magic to enroll at the school. Tell me I'm wrong."

"..."

"On my first day, you were awfully friendly toward me. It wasn't an accident. It was premeditated... You knew who I was. Are you telling me that the Dame du Lac are attempting to fool me into dying again?"

"Rintarou! This isn't the time to lash out! Nayuki saved us!" Felicia protested, putting him in his place for his attitude.

But Nayuki raised her hand to smooth things over.

"It's okay, Felicia."

"Nayuki...?! But...!"

"I'll be fine... I can understand why Rintarou—why Merlin would hate us... Don't worry about me...," she said, seeming sad and lonely. "But I hope you can believe me when I say I'm your ally, Rintarou... No matter what. I will vow to you on my life..."

"Save me your empty platitudes and answer my question. Why did you get close to me?"

Nayuki didn't say anything at first.

"I'm...sorry...but that's the only thing...I can't tell you."

She sounded like she was about to cry, voice thick with emotion.

"If I tell you...I can't be by your side anymore..."

"....." This time, it was Rintarou who was quiet.

The silence said everything there was to say...signaling denial and rejection.

"...Rintarou. Get it together," Felicia warned. "She can't be an enemy. Otherwise, why would she help us in a pinch?"

"Felicia's right. We might not know her circumstances, but we can think of her as an ally. At least for now," Sir Gawain added.

"I know! I frigging *know*!" Rintarou smashed his fist into the wall.

He was smart. He had enough reason to know Nayuki wasn't an enemy.

But he couldn't reason away his emotions.

In his former life, Merlin had been betrayed by his lover from the Dame du Lac, sealed away until his demise. That was why he hadn't been by Arthur's side. And without his guidance, Arthur had nose-dived into annihilation.

If Rintarou had still been a loner, he would have demonized Nayuki—maybe even turned his sword on her.

But now—

"....."

Rintarou took a deep breath, repressing his sinister thoughts as he gazed at Luna, who continued to slumber.

It was like his memories were flashing before his eyes, like a movie reel of his life.

Every single one was with Luna. From the day they met until now.

Well, they were all of Luna pushing him around to do her bidding. Nothing really...noteworthy.

In fact, he was getting tired just thinking about them.

Regardless...they had shared some irreplaceable memories and the best of times.

He hadn't had this much fun since his childhood...before people started to fear him...when he had been lollygagging with *that* brat in the remote parts of the English countryside.

"—I'll believe you."

He turned around and looked straight at Nayuki.

"Rintarou..."

"Not for you. For Luna," he snapped, snorting. "I need your help right now. That's why I'll believe you. Call me out for being a dirtbag...but I'll trust you if it means I get to use your magic powers... For Luna's sake."

"Thank you, Rintarou..."

Nayuki looked happy.

He knew it wouldn't be smooth sailing from here on out, but this settled things for the time being.

Felicia and Sir Gawain sighed in relief.

"Now what? What's the next move?"

"I can see them...chasing after us."

"It's a possibility. It won't take long before they worm in."

Their netherworld was in the *Assiah* stage, which meant it was relatively close to the real world.

In other words, it was entirely possible to invade it from the outside, though it would take considerable work.

A netherworld with a high-ranking *World Fusion Grade* wasn't built to last.

And if they stayed in here for too long, they would start to lose their minds, absorbed by the netherworld...*especially* into a coma, like Luna and Emma.

"They have a witch on their side. I imagine with enough time, we'll be captured... I don't think we can hide out for an extended period..." Felicia observed.

"I can't picture that brat letting us get away, just based on his personality. And if I know Reika Tsukuyomi, we won't be able to escape her clutches. I can see her finishing off Luna and Emma. Even you, Felicia."

"Gh... Me...?"

"It'll be hard to move if we have to carry their bodies... Which leaves us no choice but to strike back."

The air in the room was almost suffocating.

"And to save Luna and Emma, we need to destroy Reika Tsukuyomi's white sword."

"Really...?"

"Yeah. To get back their king's blood... That's the only way." Rintarou looked convinced.

"But, Rintarou... Who is Reika? What's up with her sword?" Felicia asked, since he seemed to know something.

"I'll tell you later. It's kind of a long story... And we have to deal with the current situation."

"Okay. But...I don't imagine winning under these circumstances will be an easy feat." Felicia sighed. "Even though we have Nayuki's support... they're on another level."

"I hate to admit you're right."

They had only Felicia, Sir Gawain, Nayuki, and Rintarou, who was off his game.

Their enemy had Sir Tristan, the witch in black, Reika Tsukuyomi, and Reika's Jack, who still hadn't made an appearance.

They were obviously at a disadvantage.

"...What's our next move, Rintarou?" Sir Gawain asked. "They're way stronger than us, even individually."

"...Gh!" He grimaced, racking the brains of Merlin to come up with a breakthrough tactic.

...But their situation was dire.

It wasn't just that they lacked strength. Luna and Emma were immobile and needed to be protected. That meant their only options were underhanded—like a surprise attack or assassination.

The odds were stacked against him. His rational judgment arrived at his chilling revelation.

Dammit...! If I had the Fomorian power...!

He still couldn't feel his natural ability bubbling inside him. Rintarou buried his face in his palm in anguish.

"....." Nayuki observed him from his side.

Her gaze moved to the hawthorn cross hanging from his neck.

She stared at it for a while.

"...Rintarou," she said at last, her voice full of resolve. "Are you prepared...to pay any cost to save Luna?"

"...Nayuki?"

"I can think of one way...to get back your Fomorian power..."

"—What?!"

They all blinked at her.

"But it's a dangerous path... If you care about her...if you're prepared to resist your fate..."

"Nayuki!" he barked. "How do you know about my Fomorian power...?!"

"....." She revealed nothing, looking directly at him and cracking a little smile.

Her eyes were locked on him, gazing at him with determination.

Around the same time, other events were transpiring in Logres Manor.

"Hmm... Luna's group lives in a swanky place."

Hitoshi and Morgan sauntered through the halls like they owned the place.

"Hey, Elaine... Can I really take their house...?"

"Of course, Master Hitoshi..."

Going by Elaine, Morgan smiled flirtatiously.

"You won, Master Hitoshi. This is the spoil of war... Another privilege of a true king."

"R-right! ...Obviously..."

Hitoshi excitedly pushed open the door in front of him, peeking into the room.

It was an unused bedroom.

A large queen bed covered by a grand canopy took up the center of the space. Expensive paintings decorated the walls, and a chandelier hung in the middle of the opulent chamber.

It was immaculate, ready to use at any time. Must have been the work of the broonies summoned to the manor.

"Wow... How wonderful." Morgan flicked on the light switch, slipping into the room.

She stepped next to the bed, looking entranced by her surroundings.

The soft glow of the chandelier illuminated her figure.

Hitoshi gulped.

Until then, she had been concealed under a veil of darkness. He hadn't really caught any glimpses of her body.

But exposed by light, there was no way around noticing her. Whether he liked it or not.

Her feminine body curved with gentle grace. Every inch of her skin was smooth. The soft peaks on her chest were perfectly proportionate, and her nipped waist and shapely thighs were works of art. The heavens extolled her teen body, but there was something mature about her—something very adult and bewitching that left him breathless.

And when he beheld her beauty for the first time, it felt like his spirit was ascending.

The goddess of beauty must have blessed her body by blowing love into her. It was contained in her risqué outfit and sheer robe. There was something more arousing about seeing her this way than nude.

She must have been born to make men go wild.

And she was standing defenselessly next to the bed...

"E-E-Elaaaaaine!"

"—UH?!"

His rational brain couldn't take it anymore. After all, he'd never been with a woman.

Hitoshi charged at Morgan, ramming her onto the bed.

He cast away his scabbard, which was perpetually strapped to his back, and buried his head in her chest.

"Aaah...! Ngh...! I—I can't wait any longer! Please, Elaine...! I'm going to...!"

"...Master Hitoshi..."

Any girl would have panicked if she had been assaulted.

But Morgan looked composed, offering a spellbinding smile to the boy who kept her pinned down.

"Elaine...! Elaine! Oh, Elaine!"

Hitoshi, overcome with unusual excitement, attempted to rip her out of her clothes. But his hands were trembling from nerves. It wasn't going well.

"Shit...! Dammit...!"

He finally managed to get her half-naked.

"Calm down, Master Hitoshi." Morgan held his shaking hands, gently admonishing him. "My heart and body are already yours... No need to rush."

"E-Elaine..."

"But...I have one wish as a woman. I wish to lie with you as a hero, Master Hitoshi. To devote my entire self to you."

"?!"

"You were born with the potential to be king. But heroism is proven by military conquest... Please make a young girl's dreams come true, Master Hitoshi..."

A roundabout way of saying "hands off."

Pleading with tears in her eyes was enough for this virgin to back off. He wouldn't violate her, much less do anything else so forceful.

"What...? What do I need to do to be a hero by your standards...?! I-I'm... I'm...!"

Hitoshi was starting to become frantic.

"...Kill Luna's group."

For a moment, Morgan flashed him a smile as cold as absolute zero.

"Show me how you punish those criminals...", she whispered. "And I'll know you're the hero who will save the world."

"...!"

"And after that happens, at daybreak..."

Morgan began to disrobe. Hitoshi couldn't take his eyes off her.

She tugged the sheer robe open slowly, teasing him, exposing her supple skin as a challenge.

"I will allow you to devour every inch of me...for as long as you wish, for as many times and as many nights as it takes to satisfy you. I will be your partner. I have been yearning for this dream of mine..."

His brain was on the verge of climax from her poisonous seduction, toxic allure, narcotic beauty.

"AAAAH...! Whoa! Okay! I'll defeat them! I'm a hero! A CHAMPION!"

In some ways, he already was a hero for backing off.

Hitoshi jumped up, burning with militancy, boasting about his powers.

"....." Morgan stared at his little shtick.

She extended her hand, touched his Excalibur...and chuckled.

Her lips were stretched into a smile, frosty and cruel.

"Hmm. I imagine that...lord of yours is having fun."

"Yeah... No."

In a corner of the manor's front garden, Reika Tsukuyomi and Sir Dinadan were looking up at the building's facade.

"If I know anything about her...she's already sworn to stay chaste to a certain man. There's no way she'd allow any other to touch her."



"Yeah... A wicked witch from the era of debauchery, when every man was for himself... I'm starting to doubt if people change..."

Sir Dinadan pulled out a pack of cigarettes he'd just bought at a convenience store, tapping the bottom of the carton and taking out a cigarette. He popped the end into his mouth.

Covering the other end with one hand, he used a dollar lighter to start it, then took a long drag, slowly pooling smoke in his lungs.

"...You look good doing that."

"Right?" Sir Dinadan let out a puff of smoke.

She eyed him in exasperation.

"...Okay, Reika. As your Jack, I have to ask you: How are things coming along?"

"Satisfactory. In fact, it couldn't be going better."

Swoosh. Reika unsheathed her sword—the white blade that pierced through Luna, Emma, and Ainz.

Her eyes were reflected in that blade...

"Satisfactory...huh? Really? That's not how I see things." Sir Dinadan blew out another cloud of smoke.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, they're still alive. Luna and Emma, I mean."

"Only because someone butted in. And I've basically completed my goal."

"But not perfectly. And I find it hard to believe you actually let a chance to kill someone slip by you..."

"...It was a fluke."

"Hmm? ...Okay." Sir Dinadan took the lit cigarette from his mouth and looked at Reika.

"Hmph. Say what you want, but they're on their deathbeds. They won't recover—ever. We can kill them whenever... What's the problem?" she asked.

"Since I can't fight for you, I've been passing the time snooping around. Seems that old man—Ainz—survived. He apparently just woke up in the hospital."

Sir Dinadan added that he'd dropped out of the battle since he was without his Excalibur and Round Fragment.

"...Was that also a fluke, Reika?"

"...Hmph. So I might be out of practice... Never imagined I would fail in killing a senior citizen..."

Her expression stayed in place.

"...Are you...having second thoughts...? Just a guess. That might be making you lose your edge."

"Absurd," Reika spat. "Everything is going according to plan. These are steps to achieve my goal."

"....."

"Obviously, I'll need to wrap up loose ends. Luna, Emma, Ainz... I'll take their lives sooner or later. And then I'll get Felicia—and Hitoshi. I'll kill all the Kings. No exceptions. I won't show mercy or compassion."

"You never change. Are you sure? No regrets?"

"I'm a sinner. Everything from my body to soul is corrupted. But I still have to achieve my goal, even if it means tainting myself. To atone."

Her eyes hardened, looking unkind...and flooding with purpose.

Sir Dinadan didn't say anything as he watched her... He let his cigarette burn.

"...If that's your decision," he said.

"Hmph... I'll never understand you... You know you can betray me, right?" she challenged.

He went silent.

"I can tell when you're playing dumb. You'd rather stick a knife in my back, huh?"

"....." Sir Dinadan took a silent puff of his cigarette.

Eventually, he turned to the skies.

"No... I have no right, Reika. I told you. I'll watch you become king... That's my duty as the knight who couldn't stop the fall of the Round Table."

The corners of his mouth curled up.

"I was their balancer... A nickname that I couldn't care less about... And I still couldn't do a thing."

His cigarette turned to ash as his eyes became distant.

"....."

Reika stared at him, a troubled expression on her face.

—

Nayuki Fuyuse thought quietly.

When she closed her eyes like this, she seemed to recall vivid memories of her happiest days. Back when everything in the world seemed to shine. Back when she felt blessed...

On that day, he and I had just taken a stroll through the flowers lining the shores of a beautiful lake.

"I just don't get it," he muttered, using my lap as a pillow.

His head rested on my knees, and he looked up at me like he was ready to throw a tantrum.

"Why do you keep hanging out with a jerk like me?"

Like a child who couldn't be honest about his feelings.

Cute, I thought.

"You know what they call me on the streets? ...The devil's bastard. The incarnation of destruction. The harbinger of calamity... Even the Round Table won't get near me..."

I answered him. "But I know your true self."

"....."

"You might look like a horrible person...but you're actually kind and gentle. But you can be stubborn. And you're chronically lonely. You're dying for attention. You just want people to see you and be by your side. Right?"

I giggled, confident in my reply.

"And I just can't seem to leave you alone."

I may have been a little too direct.

His eyes narrowed. He started to look upset.

"...Hmm. As if you'd understand... Stop."

He reached out and yanked me by my arm, pulling me closer...

"Ah?!"

He pinned me to the ground, binding my palms together above my head with a single hand.

"Maybe I should make you rethink your impression of me. How does that sound?"

As I lay immobile, he looked down, using his free hand to tilt my chin up, threatening me.

"Right now, I could assault you until you lose consciousness. I could physically show you that rumors of my heresy are true... See? I knew you didn't want me. Cry! Scream! Call for help! Push me away!"

But...I ended up in a fit of laughter when I saw his desperate attempt to scare me off.

"...What's so funny? Don't you understand the position you're in right now?"

"You wouldn't do that."

Well, I thought to myself, I wouldn't mind...if I became his...by force...

And I trusted him.

"Tell me I'm wrong," I said.

"..."

He awkwardly averted his gaze...and let me go, rolling to his side and turning away from me.

"Tch... You throw me off my game..."

"Hee-hee-hee..." I stroked his hair, gently combing through it with my fingers. "Good boy, Merlin... Here, I'll give you a pat on the head."

Warmth radiated through my body from my fingertips. Our time together had made me melt into a temperate heat.

"...Hey... Sorry...for doing what I just did..."

"Hmm, hmm. ♪ "

Everything would have been better if their memories had ended with those happy times.

"You're kidding! You betrayed me!"

It didn't take long for my happy memories to be obliterated into detestation, anger, and outrage.

The scene had changed.

We were deep in a certain forest, in front of a large boulder.

"I'm sorry...! I'm so sorry...!" I wept as I apologized to him.

But he didn't forgive me. There was no ground for forgiveness.

After all, I had done a terrible thing.

I had trodden on his feelings and trust. I had betrayed him.

It was barely acceptable for me to apologize. He would never forgive me.

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry, Merlin...! I'm sorry...!"

All I could do was parrot this phrase.

"You were the only one I trusted...! Dammit! Curse you! You got close to me...fooled me! Curse the Dame du Lac! I'll kill you...! I'll murder you in cold blood!"

"*Hic...* I'm...sorry...! *Sniff...* Aaaah! ...I'm...sorry! I...! I had no other choice...!"

"Sorry, Arthur! I...can't be...by your side...anymore...! AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

And every moment of joy was smashed to pieces...by a grave sin that would almost never be forgiven.

—

"...Nayuki? What's wrong?" Rintarou called out.

She seemed lost in thought.

Nayuki snapped back to her senses, cracking a small smile.

"I-it's nothing..."

They were still in the campus infirmary in the netherworld.

"Rintarou...are you mentally prepared for this?"

"Yeah." Rintarou nodded and looked at the floor around him.

Celtic Ogham letters and a triquetra had been drawn to create a magic circle.

Nayuki had created it for him.

"...I'm going to go into my own netherworld...digging deep into my subconscious... I'm going to confront my other self that haunts me."

"Right. I'll guide you with magic. Your Fomorian power is held hostage by your other self... You need to seize it and bring it under your control... Then no one can lord it over you...and you'll be able to use it of your own volition... I think it will lighten your physical burden, too..."

Rintarou recalled his other self went by the name of Id.

"...I think you already understand this, Rintarou, but..."

"Yeah. Gaze into the abyss, and it gazes back at you... This is a suicide mission. I might not be able to come back, but..."

Rintarou knew what he had to do.

"But I'm still going to go... Things will fall apart if I don't do anything... And I can't leave them in this condition."

He looked over at Luna and Emma.

"I don't want to lose them... To me, Luna is....."

...What was she to him? He almost didn't realize he had said that out loud.

He hesitated.

"Do you have...that hawthorn charm on?" Nayuki asked, giggling.

"Huh? You know about this thing?" Rintarou prodded at the cross that hung from his neck, blinking at her.

"Yes... I saw Luna make matching ones in the student council room."

"...Matching ones? What're you talking about?"

"Ah. Forget what I said. I shouldn't have told you... Um. Anyway... I'm sure this will let you and Luna..."

Nayuki muttered something in old Celtic at the cross, reaching out to touch it.

"Hmm? What did you just do?"

"A bit of magic. Asking for your safe return."

"...?" Rintarou seemed skeptical.

But Nayuki seemed relieved, smiling with confidence. He just couldn't get a good read on her.

"Hey, Nayuki... Can I ask you something?"

"What would that be?"

"How do you know so much about me?"

"!"

"Even I didn't know someone was controlling my powers until recently... But you knew everything about it... In fact, you know a lot about me in general."

Nayuki was silent.

"Hey, what do you know about me? Who is my other self? And...who are *you*?"

Nayuki looked troubled and apologetic as she kept mum.

"...Keeping it to yourself, huh?"

"I'm sorry... I'm really sorry..." Nayuki kept apologizing, looking at his unreadable expression.

She turned her imploring gaze to him.

"But please believe me when I say I'm your ally...! I know I used to trick and deceive people...but I'm not lying about this!"

"....."

"I exist for you... I don't care what happens to me if it helps you... You can do anything to me. And I'll help in any way I can... I just want to support you...lend you my strength... Please..."

"....."

"I don't need anything in exchange... Just use me in any way you see fit. Use me until I serve no utility... Please..." Nayuki begged, appearing to be at her wit's end...

Rintarou quietly stepped toward her...

"...Geez. Don't be stupid..."

He sighed, placing a hand on top of her head.

"...R-Rintarou?"

"Sorry about...all of that earlier. I just had bad associations with the Dame du Lac... Sorry for saying that I was going to use you..." He offered a dry smile. "I just...can't seem to be mean to you... I wonder why..."

".....!" Nayuki swallowed her breath.

With Nayuki in his periphery, Rintarou once again looked over at Luna and Emma in bed.

He fixed his eyes on them.

"I'll come back with Fomorian power. We'll beat those losers and save Luna and Emma. A grand finale. Maybe I'll make Luna throw another banquet, and we can party like there's no tomorrow... And you're invited, obviously," he said. "...What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"Nothing...nothing at all... It's just that your words..."

She gently wiped at the corners of her eyes and regained her composure.

"...Let's do this, Rintarou. Are you ready?"

"You betcha."

Nayuki started to whisper some kind of spell.

The magic circle at Rintarou's feet began to glow, engulfing him in light...and opening the door to his subconscious. He melted into the netherworld.

"Be careful, Rintarou... The other Rintarou hiding in your depths...is formidable," she called out.

"...I know. I've already experienced him."

"Please don't forget...there are people waiting for you." Nayuki glanced at Luna. "And for their sakes...make sure you come home in one piece..."

"...Yeah."

Rintarou disappeared into the light.

He crossed the boundary between the real world and the illusory world, digging into his own depths.

"Rintarou..." Nayuki quietly emitted magic as she watched him go and prayed.

—

He plunged down.

Deeper and deeper, Rintarou plummeted into the abyss.

This was his own netherworld—the world of his psyche.

He was heading toward the deepest part of himself.

Suddenly, a chill sprayed his entire body.

It was a column of water, slowing his free fall.

Water gurgled in his ears. His body sank.

Am I underwater?! ...Is this the ocean?!

The taste of brine spread into his mouth. The seawater seemed to coat him thickly. He scowled as he dived under.

There was no light at all. The darkness became more saturated as he dived farther underwater. The water became icy.

He didn't know why an ocean would be inside him...but Rintarou realized...this was a forbidden realm that no healthy person would ever enter.

...Gah.

Terror faintly gnawed his mind.

However, he didn't retreat. He had already prepared himself.

Rintarou pushed out his unease, diving deeper.

He could hear bubbles.

Because he was underwater, he could pick up the sound of something miles ahead of him.

It indicated there was something lurking on the other side of the darkness. Monsters of fear and madness.

He wouldn't stand a fighting chance against them. Their fangs or claws or maws or tentacles would rip him into shreds. These sounds of despair tested his soul and mind.

If he were an average person, that would have been the last of his sanity. He would have lost his mind.

...Hold yourself together. After all, this is just another netherworld... This is your mind... I'm just being tested by my own psyche...

He listened to the sound of his mind from the ocean water.

Rintarou went down.

—

—

—

—Maybe a hundred yards.

—Or a thousand.

—Or even tens of thousands.

For almost an eternity, Rintarou continued to dive.

"Hey, do you know the meaning of *Fomorian*?"

He suddenly appeared in front of Rintarou.

"The origin of the word comes from old Celtic—*Fomoria*. There are many meanings... 'Bottom of the ocean.' 'Family of devils.' 'Giants.' And... 'the menace of the sea.'"

His smile was lurid, welcoming Rintarou.

"In other words...the Fomorian line are gods that belong to the sea. Making this the ideal place."

"...Id!"

His other self—Id—had appeared.

In his hand, he raised an eyeball with a golden iris, lording it over Rintarou.

"Yo... Feels like it was just yesterday, mate..."

"No need for introductions. If we're the same, you know what I'm here for."

Rintarou drew his swords.

"I'm going to beat you and take your Fomorian power. Prepare yourself."

He pointed at the eyeball in Id's hands with his weapons.

"Hey, hey, hey, hey... That's no fair... Without me, you won't be able to finish your mission."

"Which would be perfect. I have no idea who assigned me that mission, but I refuse to be strapped down to it! Get out!"

"...Aw. You were never good at listening..."

Because they were each other, they no longer had anything else to say. Their fight was unavoidable.

"Well, fine. You act as the front end, and I'm the back... Our existence is mutually exclusive..."

A sinister power started to rise from the eyeball, wrapping around Id to make the evil alteration.

Fomorian Transformation.

"I hope you know I'm much stronger than you. This is a good opportunity for me. If I can kill you here, I can become you..."

"....."

Rintarou was aware.

But this was all he had. To save Luna, he needed that vile power.

"How can we be the same if I want to kill Arthur...and you want to save Arthur? ...Well, it doesn't matter. How about we start this thing?"

Id drew his sword.

They were the same red and white swords as Rintarou's.

"Perfect. I'll show you how to use them... The swords of Ddraig the Red Dragon and Gwiber the White Dragon!"

A wicked aura brimmed from Id's swords as he charged Rintarou. It was like he wasn't in the ocean.

"It's...begun," Felicia observed as she stood by in the hallway.

Nayuki meekly came out of the nurse's office.

"Seize the power from the dark side of his soul in his subconscious... Bring it under his control... Will it be that easy?" Felicia asked.

"I think it will be difficult...but I believe in him."

Nayuki broke into a confident smile, trusting him from the bottom of her heart.

Felicia found herself believing in him, too.

"Okay... All we can do is wait for him..."

"Since his power is the only way to get out of this quandary..."



Sir Gawain nodded faithfully behind her.

"Merlin... The strongest sorcerer from the ancient era... I thought Rintarou was just his reincarnation...but it seems he has mysteries of his own...," Felicia mused.

"Even though we lived in the same generation...I didn't know anything about this complicated situation in his soul... In fact, I wonder if he didn't know himself," Sir Gawain added.

"Merlin had been murdered by Nimue of the Dame du Lac. I know he exited the legendary stage midway through their final performance..."

"It seems there might be something else going on... Hey, Nayuki. Do you know anything? You used to be a member of their collective, right?"

Nayuki's expression changed almost imperceptibly.

"I-I'm sorry, I don't know much about it... There are many Dame du Lac, after all..."

Felicia and Sir Gawain didn't notice this subtle change.

"Of course. Come to think of it, you said you had left the Dame du Lac." Felicia sighed. "Now isn't the time to dig into his past. Until he comes back...we need to protect Luna and Emma..."

"Right. They should be coming soon." Sir Gawain turned to Nayuki again.

"...Nayuki, are you sure this is what you want? Even though you're part of the Dame du Lac...you're an outsider in this situation. You don't have to put your life on the line. Are you still going to fight with us?"

"Yes. I need to. If Rintarou is fighting for your sakes...then I need to fight for his sake. That's my destiny..."

She was firm. No amount of persuasion could break her resolve.

In that case, there was nothing to say... Sir Gawain accepted her words at face value.

THUNK... The air inside the netherworld shifted.

"...They're here."

"...They have started to invade this netherworld."

Tensions ran high.

"I'm guessing it's...the witch? It seems that the netherworld's *World Fusion Grade* has been bumped from *Assiah* to *Yetzirah*..."

"What?!" Felicia's expression hardened.

In other words, the world was moving away from the real world and approaching the illusory one...which meant they couldn't escape from the netherworld anymore.

"Hmph. They really think they have one over on us. It's like they're saying they're certain of victory." Sir Gawain snorted.

"Well, we knew this would happen. I would do this if I was the enemy."

"It'll be fine. It seems they couldn't change the structure of an existing world. It's just the same as when we constructed it."

"We don't need to worry about them launching a surprise or sneak attack."

"All that's left is to clash with our opponents...I guess."

The three of them prepared themselves.

"Let's go."

"Roger."

They started to walk down the hallway, heading in the direction of the decisive battle—to the locations they had prepared...

CHAPTER 5

Individual Struggles

Hitoshi Kataoka, Sir Tristan, and Morgan overcame the boundary, appearing in the netherworld.

The scene before them was an expanse of snow.

"Wh-what is this...place...?" Hitoshi gaped.

They were in the courtyard of Camelot International High School. Although they were surrounded by buildings, it didn't feel that way.

Trees and colorful flower beds dotted the area. The garden had geometrically trimmed hedges that lulled any visitor into complete relaxation.

But everything was blanketed in snow and ice.

"I won't let you through."

In the middle stood a girl who looked like she had been waiting for them. Nayuki.

Her entire body was cloaked in a blizzard and an icy chill. The personification of winter.

In the snow, her frigid face appeared intimidating.

"Hmm? You're here to greet us? I was certain that dumbass would be here." Hitoshi blinked. "Oh? Did he run home to mommy? I bet he did. Because I'm too powerful. And his power is no match for mine. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"....."

But Nayuki did not respond.

Her cold gaze pierced him.

"...Oh yeah... You're part of Luna's group..." Hitoshi sighed. "I don't feel like beating you up...since you're obviously not a King... And you're a girl..."

"Don't worry about me. I'm very strong."

Fwoosh. Nayuki lifted her hands, and the blizzard started to whip around...cracking with ice until it formed a sword made from snow.

Hitoshi staggered back, seemingly overpowered by her demonic magic.

"I won't let you pass by me. For Rintarou's sake... If you want to force your way, prepare yourself," she cautioned, sounding firm in her convictions.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Nice! Someone's cool!"

...Hitoshi clapped his hands together in delight.

"And cute. I kinda like you! You're wasting your talents by joining Luna's group of delinquents!"

Hitoshi grinned, making a proposal to Nayuki. "Hey! How about you join me? Just abandon Luna and that dumbass!"

"!"

"I have the potential of a true king. I'm going to become a hero and save the world. You would shine brighter working under me... Am I wrong?"

Nayuki was speechless as she watched Hitoshi.

"You know how powerful I am. There's no way you'll win. Luna is as good as dead. You can already see the outcome. Why don't you come to this side? I won't do anything bad to you... Okay?" Hitoshi suggested in a sickly sweet tone.

"I was part of the Dame du Lac. Which has allowed me to see all kinds of people who have called themselves heroes," she quietly responded.

"Hmm? Yeah? I guess the Dame du Lac live a long time. And? How do I compare to the other guys? I imagine I rank—"

"They all share a common quality."

"...Hmm? Like what?" He didn't seem too happy to be interrupted.

"No one becomes a hero because they want to."

"?!"

"It just happened that they were doing what needed to be done and what they thought should change... Innocent actions catapult commendable achievements that mark those who are known as heroes."

His face had clouded over. "Wh-what are you implying...?"

"You'll never become a hero as long as that's your goal. If you keep this up...I'm sure you'll be left with regret and despair..."

Her eyes were sympathetic.

"End this," she urged. "You're not meant to fight in this battle."

But Hitoshi didn't see the kindness in her words.

"First, the dumbass. And now you... How can everyone in Luna's group be so annoying? Fine... I admit I was wrong for inviting a bitch like you to join me."

With squared shoulders and scowling eyes, Hitoshi began panting raggedly in fury.

"Go get her, Sir Tristan! Get that bitch! You think you can get away with things because you're cute? Yeah, right! Give the conceited airhead a taste of reality!"

"...Hmph. Fine. I know a knight shouldn't raise his hand to a girl... But I have zero cares to give. I've already failed as a knight anyway."

Sir Tristan seemed even larger than he actually was.

He was as apathetic as always...but his Aura remained as overwhelming as a divine beast.

"...Rintarou...please lend me some strength..."

But Nayuki neither faltered nor retreated, instead readying her ice sword.

And she disappeared, kicking up dancing snowflakes in her wake, charging with her sword through the blizzard.

With a gale thrashing around him, Sir Tristan started to strike back. His blade and her icy fury were ready to clash.

"Hmm. Looks like they're firing off."

Sir Dinadan blew out a puff of smoke. "Nice! Look at that! Taking on Tristie? Atta girl! Kids these days... I gotta say, I'm impressed."

"It's not the time to joke around, Sir Dinadan. I wasted mana manifesting you because you asked to come along. At least *try* to take this seriously."

"All right, all right..." He took another drag of his cigarette, scanning their surroundings.

The area was barred by iron fencing. They stood on the roof of the main building of Camelot International High School.

Sure enough, there were people waiting there to greet them.

Felicia. And her Jack, Sir Gawain.

"...Sir Dinadan?" Sir Gawain called out. "...Is that you?!"

"Yo! It's been a while, G."

This was the first time they'd been on a battlefield together.

Sir Gawain blinked in shock. "Are you...Reika's Jack?! Why were *you* summoned?! I think I remember you weren't part of the *numbered seats* of the Round Table—"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha. I've got my reasons." Sir Dinadan flashed a winsome grin. "Don't get the wrong idea. I'm just a spectator. I wouldn't win against you, G. I mean, even your little girl might bash me in... Oh, but I'm definitely stronger than Kay."

He was playful. There wasn't a hint of abjectness or self-derision as he turned to the sky and blew out smoke.

"H-he's...weird..."

"Ah...Sir Dinadan is just like that. How do I put this politely? It's hard to get a grip on him..." Sir Gawain admitted. "In that case, Sir Dinadan, I'll ask you this, knight to knight. Is Reika Tsukuyomi our only opponent? Are you really not going to fight?"

"More or less. As long as that witch doesn't butt in... Not that I think that'll happen."

Sir Dinadan took off the sword at his hip and cast it away, leaning against the fence that surrounded the roof, smoking another cigarette.

It seemed he really didn't intend to intervene.

At a glance, he appeared insincere. But they didn't have the time to search for a clever look in his eyes.

They couldn't wrap their heads around his curious behavior, but this wasn't the place to probe into it...

...since there was an opponent demanding their immediate attention.

"How strange..."

Reika Tsukuyomi looked around her surroundings as though she were displeased.

"Where is Rintarou Magami...? Where is Merlin? I used my sixth sense to search this place...but I can't seem to find him anywhere in this netherworld. Even if he was plotting something in the shadows, I would have sensed him."

"...Who knows?" Felicia said, flippant.

Reika snorted. "In that case...did he run away?"

"....."

"Well. I would understand if he did... He's a big loser and thinks everything is a joke. He wouldn't blink an eye abandoning his friends if it meant saving him—"

"This has nothing to do with him... Aren't we in the middle of something here?" Felicia seemed annoyed.

It must have stemmed from Reika's comments about him.

Reika blinked in surprise.

"Right... How about we begin?"

With her dagger—her Excalibur—in her left hand, Reika Tsukuyomi turned to Felicia and Sir Gawain and started walking.

"I have nothing against you, Felicia Ferald, but I need your life."

With her free hand, she unsheathed another sword.

The ornamental blade was snow-white.

As her eyes caught the light of Reika's blade, Felicia brandished her weapon, tense.

"And then I'll finish off Luna and Emma... And I'll put Ainz out of his misery... I'll murder all the Kings with my own hands...to fulfill my wish..."

Which meant...

"Reika Tsukuyomi...you are...*you*," Sir Gawain said. "Which is why Sir Dinadan is—?"

Reika remained silent. Her face revealed nothing.

She just declared one thing—simply, gravely, sternly.

"Royal Road—Sword of Destruction!"

They were engulfed by a powerful Aura as daggers appeared around Reika. The blades' tips were pointed at Felicia and Sir Gawain.

"...Let's go, Sir Gawain."

"Yes, ma'am!"

Felicia and Sir Gawain didn't shrink back; instead, they sprinted forward like they were carried by the wind.

The daggers rushed in like a meteor shower slicing through the night.

There wasn't a single ray of light at the bottom of the ocean...where a vicious battle continued to unfurl.

"AAAAAAH!"

Rintarou's crimson and white pair of blades...

"HRAAAAGH!"

...Id's same weapons...

They spun around and around, creating a whirlpool as they barreled into each other. With every hit, the water ripped into rings that spread for thousands of miles.

The waves crashed into Rintarou. It felt like getting zapped by an electrical current. His body was numb.

Even at that moment, he felt like his eardrums were about to burst from the whine of high vibrations coming from the water.

"What's wrong with you?! You're so slow!" Id boomed, punching down with his blade.

Rintarou met his attack with his pair of crossed swords.

"AAAAAH?!"

But he was overpowered by Id, who was torpedoing through the water.

"If this is all you got...I can't hand over my pooowers!" Id hounded after Rintarou.

Though his speed was terrifying, his movements were calculated—like a shiver of sharks hunting their prey.

"Take that! Aren't you supposed to be stealing the Fomorian power from me?! Show me you want it, pal!"

Id circled around him quickly, spiraling and pummeling Rintarou with a series of unpredictable attacks.

"DAMMIT!" Rintarou desperately parried with his swords to stop the attacks.

He didn't have time to see them anymore.

His swords moved with instinct.

Id's moves were his moves. If he hadn't been familiar with them, he would have been torn to pieces and reduced to fish bait already.

Damn...! Crap...! I knew this would happen...but...!

He had been prepared, knowing he was at a disadvantage. He'd known he wouldn't be able to win through any ordinary means.

But he had chosen to fight...to save Luna.

That didn't change that he was losing. They were just on fundamentally different levels.

As the cold waves crashed into him, he could feel his warmth and spirit wash away with it. The water pressure was starting to crush his body. Breathing was becoming difficult. It was as though he couldn't get enough oxygen. His heart was on the verge of bursting.

He couldn't perform like he usually did.

Even with Fomorian power, he would have still been in the same position.

Get ahold of yourself! This is my subconscious! The water pressure and the thinning air are fake! If I let my subconscious get the best of me, that just shows how scared I am...!

With his left sword, he parried Id's sword, which almost slipped by his torso.

When the impact hit him, Rintarou swiveled as he was propelled backward before using his Aura to launch himself in the opposite direction. Eventually, when he thought he had finally stopped himself from getting blasted back, Id came directly down on his head to stab him.

Rintarou twisted to dodge. But the shock wave washed him away with its staggering tide.

I need to remember... I came here to protect Luna...! I'm going to steal the Fomorian power from him...! And then I'm going to save her...! I'm going to beat him and go home...! I'm going back to her...! That's why—!

Id seemed hell-bent on ridiculing Rintarou.

"That's impossible, pal."

"Huh?!"

Id appeared in front of Rintarou's eyes—upside-down.

"You have to know that the abyss will stare back at you... Sounds cliché, but it holds a nugget of truth."

"...Gh!"

"You shouldn't have come here... Because it let me *cling* to your existence. You're already part of this *netherworld*...like me. You can't go back anymore... This place will suck you in... You knew that coming in. Didn't you?"

"Shut up! Get lost!"

Rintarou tried to slit Id's throat. His sword flashed.

But the water's resistance made his movements slow and heavy.

That clumsy swing obviously wasn't enough to strike Id, who moved like he wasn't underwater. He swam freely, taking his distance from Rintarou.

"Ha! That's it! That's the spirit!"

Id moved away, unruffled and sneering.

"I see you flail around and slice through air... Trying to fight *me*...? Trying to defeat *me*...? You're fundamentally wrong."

"Stop blabbing...!" Rintarou barked. "I said I came here to beat you...! What's so funny about—?"

"That's not like you, Merlin... Come with an open mind... You still don't get it, do you?"

The next moment...

Id laughed in his nasty way as his body gradually melted into the darkness, spreading into the ocean.

"What...?" A shiver ran up Rintarou's spine as he went silent.

At that instant, he finally realized Id's words.

"That's right, pal... You understand..." Id's voice scratched at his mind.

"You shouldn't be fighting me... Your opponent has been the entire ocean...your entire subconscious...this entire time... Heh-heh-heh-heh. HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!"

"—Gh?!"

He could sense it from the other side of the darkness. He could feel the horde of beasts rushing toward him with unbridled rage and malice, smelling of murder.

Rintarou hadn't noticed them until now.

But the sounds. Oh, the sounds. Fangs clicked; claws scraped; tentacles unwound. He couldn't identify some of the wretched sounds coming from unknown appendages. They made him sick to his stomach.

The creatures of the deep abyss shrieked, asserting their repulsive existence to Rintarou.

His heart squeezed in fear. He'd never experienced anything like it.

"...Ah!"

That was when he knew he shouldn't have ventured here.

He had been naive. Maybe even optimistic. His ego had been too big. He thought he would be able to handle it.

But this was a forbidden space that no human could be advised to enter...

Some kind of tentacle wetly wrapped around his arms and legs. Something opened its maw, showing him gleaming rows of teeth.

Thousands of giant eyes snapped open, focusing all on him.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!"

His heart had been seized by despair that burst his soul.

Suddenly, someone came to their consciousness.

"...Rin...tarou...?"

It was Luna.

"...Where am I...?"

Through her mental fog, she took stock of the situation.

"...I—I think I remember...someone...stabbed me...?"

Her bedridden body felt heavy. It wasn't moving the way she wanted it to.

She rotated her head to scan her surroundings.

Her body, which was lying in bed, was heavy and didn't seem as though it would move. She turned only her head to look around.

No one was nearby. Emma was on another bed, sound asleep.

"....."

She couldn't comprehend all of this.

She was exhausted. All she wanted was to sleep. Her consciousness was hazy. It was hard to think. The world was spinning.

"Rintarou..."

She thought she'd just heard him call out in despair.

She needed to get up now. Do something. Otherwise, she might not ever see her vassal again...

That was the only thing that motivated Luna to channel everything into getting out of bed.

"...Rin...ta...rou....."

Luna desperately clung to her consciousness, which kept trying to slip away. She finally rolled to the side of the bed...until she tumbled off, body heavy.

Her entire body was covered with bandages to treat her wounds. She wore only underwear, half-naked.

She couldn't care less. Luna crawled along the ground, inching forward.

She crept toward her uniform, splotted with blood and resting on a chair.

With shaky hands, she reached for her clothes, then rummaged for something in one of her pockets.

They were still in the middle of a battle.

It looked like hell had frozen over. Gray—the color of death.

Everything was frozen in place, covered in ice. The world was an arctic tundra.

“Hah!”

Nayuki sprinted through the snowy field, cloaked by a blizzard. She seemed as lithe and swift as a snowshoe hare.

Which made Sir Tristan the hunter.

He aimed his bow at her.

“Hmph.”

Sir Tristan fired an arrow as she zigzagged in his vision.

His bow, transformed into an artifact, contained his pride and mastery in archery.

His arrows were bound with his Aura, hitting their mark unless they were physically struck down. They shot out like autocannons, assaulting Nayuki like hail.

“Ice spirits, come together and dance—!” Nayuki chanted.

Dance of the Ice Spears. Fairy magic.

The blizzard eddied as icicles formed around Nayuki.

Their sharp points turned to Sir Tristan, whizzing toward the arrows like a barrage.

SHLING-SHLING-SHLING!

It sounded like glass was smashing into pieces. Icicles broke as they struck down the arrows.

“Is that all you’ve got?”

What could that mean?

Sir Tristan’s shots were coming far faster than the rate at which Nayuki could use her magic. He spun like a top, firing arrows before she could even take a breath.

A swift repetition of three actions: nocking an arrow, pulling the bow, shooting.

Each arrow carried a fatal power, but Sir Tristan shot them liberally, like he was wielding a peashooter.

“Gah!”

On the other hand, Nayuki had to channel all her mana to face him.

If even one of her icicles wasn't propelled with enough power, Sir Tristan would shoot her.

The icicles shattered the arrows. Pieces of ice filtered through the air, dancing through the skies.

"—Gh?!"

Nayuki was starting to fall behind.

Three arrows had snaked through her barrier of icicles, rushing toward her and breaking skin.

And when that happened, the deafening shatter of glass echoed around them.

"What?!"

Nayuki's body crumbled into pieces.

...It wasn't actually her. It was like a thin board had been reflecting her form.

"A mirror...?! An ice mirror?!"

Icy Moon Mirror. Fairy magic.

Sir Tristan instantly recognized it.

"HRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

Nayuki brandished her sword, coming down on Sir Tristan from above.

"Gah!" Sir Tristan threw aside his bow and reached for his sword.

He looked up at her, trying to counter...and was punched by a violent blizzard.

Winter Storm. The chill robbed Sir Tristan of his heat, freezing his blood and dulling his movements.

"Hragh!"

Without a moment's delay, Nayuki launched a two-stage attack.

She was like a bolt of lightning, flashing her swords to clear her landing.

"Guh?!"

Sir Tristan barely dodged, parrying with his sword. But he was sent flying.

Without hesitation, he launched himself off the ground, withdrawing.

Nayuki pursued him. Wind whipped around her.

Every time he got close to her, his movements slowed, became more sluggish. When Nayuki saw this, she kicked off the ground, pouncing to attack with her ice sword.

"Wh-what...? This is bad!"

Hitoshi panicked, watching the battle from afar.

"She's driving him back... But what about my powers? I—I can't believe that bitch! That's impossible!" Hitoshi shrieked in frustration. "What do you think you're doing, Sir Tristan? Hurry up and kill her!"

"Don't fret, Master Hitoshi," Morgan advised. "The one from the Dame du Lac just *looks* impressive. But she has nothing on one of the three strongest knights of the Round Table."

"Nothing on him...? But look at her...!"

"What don't you understand? She used all her mana to dull his movements and freeze the ground. She's chipping away at her life to fight. Like fireworks. Brilliant only for a moment."

"...Huh?!"

"Meanwhile, Sir Tristan is only using minimal mana for his Aura... It's so obvious who will be drained of energy first."

"R-really...?"

Hitoshi couldn't have known, since his gut was always wrong.

"She might keep up temporarily... But the time will come," Morgan assured.

Fwoosh! Blood sprayed through the air, instantly freezing into red crystals, which the blizzard scattered.

"Gh?!"

They saw Nayuki's sword had broken in half. Sir Tristan's blade had grazed her right shoulder.

"Damn lucky...", Sir Tristan muttered as she jumped back.

He didn't seem interested in pursuing her.

"If it weren't for that blizzard...I would have sliced through your shoulder."

"...Gh?!" The blood drained from her face as she applied pressure to her wound.

She didn't have time to heal it with magic. All she could do was freeze her gash to stop the bleeding.

"See? We're not on the same level. Are you sure you want to continue?"

"...Of course." Sweat trickled down her forehead.

Nayuki formed another ice sword.

"...I know you don't want to accept your death. Aren't you an outsider? Why do you even care?" Sir Tristan asked.

Nayuki stood straighter.

"Isn't it obvious? I have someone I want to protect! Someone I would die for! I would do anything if it meant securing his future... I don't have the option of losing...or the luxury of backing down!"

"?!" Sir Tristan gaped at her.

...Eventually, he let out a pained sigh. "...I'm jealous of you... You have someone. You can continue to feel those emotions."

"Huh?"

"It was impossible for me. Even when I longed for her, it didn't reach her... Reality can be so cruel... Ah, Iseult..."

Sir Tristan stared up at the heavens, reciting the name of someone who wasn't present. He turned to Nayuki, looking at her apologetically with his knowing gaze.

"...Okay. Then let's continue."

"Sir Tristan...?"

"Just remember the world is cruel. The more we want to protect someone, the more we hold them dear...the more unattainable they become."

I'm sure you'll become acquainted with despair, too. I can tell from your eyes... Mine used to look like yours."

Conversation over. Sir Tristan readied his sword.

His Aura was stronger than ever. That fight must have been his preliminary round. Just to feel her out.

The real battle was about to start.

"Please...Rintarou...give me strength...and courage...!"

Nayuki tried to remain firm, even though she knew the outcome was grim, calming her nerves before turning to Sir Tristan. She looked like she wasn't going to miss a single attack.

"...Huh?!"

She realized Sir Tristan had disappeared. She couldn't wrap her head around it.

"You're slow."

"Ah?!" Nayuki didn't even have time to turn around.

FWOOSH! A massive burst of blood stained the snow a deep crimson.

The tips of the daggers zinged toward her, each one hell-bent on her demise.

"Gah!" Felicia used *Mana Acceleration*, sprinting across the roof.

The shower of blades followed in hot pursuit, trying to skewer her from behind.

The daggers rammed into the wall where she'd just been like rounds fired from a machine gun, piling up on the ground like a mountain of swords.

"Heh. Are you just going to keep running, Felicia Ferald?!" Reika shouted, standing on top of a water tank on the roof.

Felicia was frantic, scrambling to escape.

Reika raised the dagger in her right hand—the Sword of Destruction—and created another set of floating daggers.

"I see you're not cutting me any slack!" Felicia barked back.

The flashing tips of daggers focused on her in pursuit. Their silver streaks broke up the night sky.

With *Flower Fire Dance*, she managed to burn some of them.

A graceful swing of her sword struck down another group of daggers as she jumped away from any remaining blades.

DRRRRRRRRRRRRR! The daggers drilled into the ground.

"You're a one-trick pony!" Felicia shouted, trying to provoke her. "I've already memorized your moves—"

"Is that right?"

A shiver went up Felicia's spine.

"—Gh?!" She whipped around.

The buried daggers had peeled themselves out of the ground, rotating in the air until they were pointing at Felicia.

Crap! Can she continue to control them even after they're hit?!

The daggers tore through the night, targeting her again, merciless.

There were too many for her to evade or strike down.

"Ah?!"

Felicia hated that she was ready for death.

She swore she could hear the dull rip of projectiles breaking skin. But... she experienced no burning pain.

"...Are you all right, my liege?"

Sir Gawain had used his body to shield her.

"Sir Gawain?!"

He was in a terrible state. The daggers had torn through his armor like butter, impaling him.

Anyone would expect a fatal end based on his state.

"Don't worry about me." Sir Gawain wiped away the blood dribbling down the corner of his mouth. "I won't die from this."

He acted like nothing was wrong, brandishing his sword, Galatine, and shattering the storming daggers into pieces.

Their particles vanished into a mist of mana.

"I bet these daggers will operate until they hit flesh...because this Excalibur is the embodiment of King Arthur's order."

The daggers had become quiet after they pierced him. He looked down at them.

"Hmm? I'm impressed you saw through it," commended Reika from the water tank. "You're so persistent. I can't believe you can still stand even after you've been speared... I wouldn't expect anything less from the brawniest knight of the Round Table. I don't think the strongest three would have fared well."



"This is my one saving grace..."

Sir Gawain stepped forward, indicating that he was ready to continue.

"Don't leave my side, my king. I'll use everything in my body and soul to protect you." He signaled to Felicia with his eyes as he protected her.

"Hmph. You're a changed man," Reika spat, sounding surprised. "You used to pretend to be a good person...but you were just concerned about your rivalry with Sir Lancelot and Sir Lamorak. You used to suck, acting selfish and weaponizing your loyalty to King Arthur to do whatever you wanted."

"...That's true. In the past, I was an irredeemable fool."

"Hmm? And how about now? I'm surprised to find you're not just a knight by title. You're acting like a real fighter... What could have caused this change of heart?"

"A lot of things...involving Camlann Hill." Sir Gawain closed his eyes for a moment.

He could remember it like it was yesterday.

The hill under twilight. The sunset burned on the horizon. Swords and arrows jutted out of the ground like grave markings.

Every knight had died in that scene of destruction. It was the place where the legend had ended.

Sir Gawain had already been dead by then. He hadn't witnessed the scene...until he found himself in the afterlife in a netherworld preserved to mark the end of the Round Table. He had looked at it for all of eternity.

How could that have happened to the kingdom of Logres? To all its splendor and glory? To its Round Table knights?

Why had it come to this? Where and when had they gone wrong?

"...I will never make that mistake again. I'll never destroy anything like that again. This time, I will be a true knight and serve my King."

"Hmm. I can hardly recognize you." Reika looked down at him with mixed emotions.

"It seems...you haven't changed since then. My younger sister... *Mordred*."

Reika didn't even flinch.

But her silence spoke volumes.

Among the knights from the legend of King Arthur, she was up there with Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain.

She had occupied the second seat.

Sir Mordred. Traitor of the great knight King Arthur.

Child of King Arthur and Morgause, who was his half sister. Sir Mordred had a complex relationship with Sir Gawain as his half sister.

By some miracle, she had lived when Arthur tried to kill her as a child and eventually served his Round Table.

At some point, Sir Mordred had secretly started to operate behind the scenes to usurp the throne.

First, she'd manipulated Sir Gawain's jealousy to kill Sir Lamorak, the strongest knight in King Arthur's court.

Next, she had lent a hand to Sir Agravain, who had falsified the adultery between Sir Lancelot and Guinevere. That had unwittingly fueled the flames that broke up the Round Table.

And then, she had assassinated Sir Dinadan on the quest for the Holy Grail. He had been known as the balancer. And he was the only person to notice the treason, the only knight capable of bringing together the Round Table again.

Sir Mordred had continued to make her preparations...

At long last, she had gone through with her plans when King Arthur and Sir Lancelot started their war.

When King Arthur had been in Sir Lancelot's section of Brittany for an expedition, Sir Mordred had taken up an army in their home country, starting her own rebellion to crown herself. The kingdom had been split in half.

When King Arthur had returned, a war had broken out between father and daughter.

Any discussions about peace were well through. Camlann Hill had been the final battleground.

It was a battle with all their might—blood for blood. The conflict had continued from morning to night until both sides had met annihilation.

One hundred thousand had perished.

At the end of that morass, King Arthur's spear had ripped through Sir Mordred, and Sir Mordred's sword had cracked King Arthur's skull. It had ended in a draw.

And the curtain had closed on the legend of King Arthur.

"You're not going to say anything, huh...? That just proves it. Rintarou was right. You're Sir Mordred," Felicia said.

"I don't understand why you're fighting in this battle as a King—not a Jack. And I don't know why you look different now... But there's no mistake..." Sir Gawain added.

Reika snorted. "Bingo. I'm Mordred. I stole the body of a sinner named Reika Tsukuyomi. That's how I stand here now—"

She drew her sword—the one with the white blade.

"Well, I knew you'd figure it out. This sword is famous, after all..."

The king's sword. Clarent.

The second one forged by the Dame du Lac. The successor of Excalibur, the sword of the chosen king.

"As a child of adultery, I have no right to become king. But by collecting the blood of kings with this sword...the blood from King Arthur's descendants...I will receive the right to become a new king. As a candidate for the next King, I was entrusted with this sample by the former Dame du Lac."

"!"

"I assume you understand. I joined this battle to become king in King Arthur's place. That is my reason behind this massacre. I will make sure you become one with Clarent, Felicia Ferald!"

Reika oozed hostility and murder.

Felicia instinctively took a step back.

"You fool...! How long will you keep this up?!" Sir Gawain scolded. "I understand why you have a grudge against King Arthur! But didn't you feel something...when you saw Camlann Hill? When you witnessed the kingdom in ruin? When you beheld destruction?! Do you want to become king at that cost?!"

"...What grudge?"

Sir Mordred's expression tensed as if she found him senseless.

"You really think I wanted to become king because of a *grudge*?"

"—?!" Sir Gawain was silent.

Sir Mordred twirled her dagger, thrusting it out to show it to Sir Gawain and Felicia.

"The Sword of Destruction... Why do you think this evil weapon exists? If Arthur was actually a good king...why would an amateur commit treason to divide the country? Why would half the kingdom follow me if I'm a wicked traitor?"

"I don't understand! What are you trying to say?!" Felicia sounded panicked.

"Ha... I know you know..." Sir Mordred flashed a coldhearted grin before redirecting her attention to Sir Gawain. "Right? Isn't that true, brother...?"

"....." Sir Gawain was speechless.

"Okay. So you don't want to talk. It's all the same with you knights. You always want to wax lyrical about fidelity, loyalty, allegiance. But you'll turn the other way when something doesn't fit your narrative... Whatever. We don't have to talk about that now. Even if you were talking, it wouldn't change my response."

Sir Mordred thrust the point of the white sword at Felicia.

"I will kill all the Kings! And then I will become the one to take Arthur's place! I can't leave this world to his descendants! I will open the way for a new era!"

"Nonsense! You traitor!"

Felicia couldn't hold back anymore.

"Even if you have a vision, it isn't kingly to deceive and murder! A usurper will never have the throne! Not on my watch!"

"Show me, then. With your sword."

"You don't have to tell me twice!"

Felicia raised her sword.

"Royal Road—Radiant Steel Sword of Glory!"

FWST! When she declared her inscription, her sword rushed with light as blinding as the sun, washing over the area with white heat.

"Ngh?!"

Sir Mordred felt heavy, showered by the light.

Her arms slumped, and her movements started to grind to a halt. She couldn't stop herself from kneeling and hanging her head, like she was bowing down to Felicia.

"I see... You're strong," commended Sir Mordred, sounding impressed with her Excalibur.

To stand, she let her Aura strengthen her body.

"So this is the brilliance of one accepted by the people as a king! The eleven heroes... The rival chiefs of Britain kneeled before this very light...!"

At her level, Sir Mordred could use *Mana Acceleration* to move around... But it would strain her body.

"Now, Sir Gawain!"

"As you wish!"

The shower of light activated the Sun's Blessing, tripling his power. Energy pumped into his body as he raced toward the water tank.

"Hmph. I *guess* you have the potential to take the throne, even if you're a little brat... Fine." Sir Mordred cast her eyes down on them. "In that case, get a load of my true power!"

She returned her Excalibur to its sheath and raised the white sword—Clarent.

"Royal Road—Clarent, Silver Successor of King's Blood!"

"RAAAAAAAH!"

Sir Gawain had sprinted up the tank, then clutched her skull barely a moment later. He brought down his sword, booming like thunder, to behead her.

Fresh blood exploded from her body.

And then...they heard an impact.

"Wh...at?!"

Sir Mordred's sword had stopped his.

"Hmph."

And then she flipped their positions, swinging his away to the side.

Sir Gawain was knocked down at an angle from the roof, falling to the ground.

"GAAAAAAH?!"

He ricocheted off the earth and rolled away.

Felicia was appalled.

"Wh-what is that power...? Royal Road...? But..."

"Didn't I tell you this is meant to succeed Excalibur?"

Felicia didn't even have time to worry about the damage her vassal had sustained. Her eyes were glued above her head.

There was Sir Mordred. Her Aura was densely crimson, volatile as it broke off in waves as if she were a destructive dam.

Strength. Pure and simple. Crushing. Devastating.

Strength on another dimension.

She looked like a giant reaching the heavens, even though they knew it was an illusion.

It was on the same level as Rintarou's *Fomorian Transformation*... Maybe stronger.

What did she have to do to attain that range? Felicia couldn't even imagine it.

She was floored but remained composed.

"My Clarent can boost the abilities of the user, based on the stolen blood... If Excalibur is the sword of the people's leader, then Clarent is the sword of the one who wins through might."

"...Hh?!"

"It has already taken the blood of Reika Tsukuyomi. And Ainz, Emma, and Luna, even though I didn't drain all of their blood. I imagine I'll keep getting stronger...by drinking the blood of kings."

Felicia felt dizzy.

Was Sir Mordred going to become even more overpowered? Was she implying that this was just the beginning?

"Felicia Ferald, support my sword! Pave my path of bloodshed—my foundation to becoming King!"

"You can't allow it to absorb you!" Sir Gawain stood up, protecting her as the blood drained from her face. "If we cannot retreat...then we must fight! If you seek to become King, you must find an escape...even from the hands of death! Don't be scared! My soul is always with you!"

".....?!" Felicia's eyes flashed with militancy.

Sir Mordred glared at the two.

"What a nice duo... Hmph, seems you really have changed."

"Mordred..."

"But this makes the situation more unfortunate... You'll die as close to a real knight as you've ever been... I imagine you don't intend to withdraw or surrender?"

"...You've taken the words right out of my mouth."

"Very well."

His eyes burned with purpose. Sir Mordred broke into a little smile.

Her volatile Aura seemed to become denser, whipping around her body.

"I'll end this battle!"

Brandishing her sword, she turned to Sir Gawain and Felicia and plunged toward them. She was like a meteor threatening to crash into them, rippling through the air with impact.

To intercept her, Sir Gawain and Felicia turned skyward, finding their footing.

—

"...How will this end?"

As he watched the battle of astronomical proportions from the distance, Sir Dinadan smoked his cigarette.

The Aura seemed to explode with light that threatened to leave the world in pieces.

CHAPTER 6

Past and Future

In short, resistance was futile.

Rintarou Magami might have been the reincarnation of Merlin, granting him more strength than the average person as his main trait.

But in the abyss, that was as helpful as chickenshit.

This darkness was the deepest part of his human consciousness, where all of humanity was connected to each other.

Which meant he was fighting against humanity.

Facing the infinite void, Rintarou was nothing.

He couldn't resist as the fangs and claws of repulsive things he couldn't even picture in the dark ripped and shredded him. His flesh was chewed through. His bones had been ground. His marrow had been sucked out of its casing. He was dissolving into the stomachs of these wild beasts, dismembered.

As an entity, he didn't exist anymore. Not even a strand of his hair was left in the world.

What...am...I...?

His detached consciousness wandered through the darkness.

Why...am...I here...?

But even his mind was starting to melt, slipping into the sea of darkness.

I feel sleepy...heavy...tired...

He was disappearing.

As an entity, Rintarou Magami was wasting away.

As he witnessed this, he thought to himself...

I think I remember...that I have to do something... I think I remember that I need to go back somewhere...

It was something really important to him. He had promised he would get things done and come home, even if it meant shouldering the risks.

But what was it? He couldn't remember...

His existence continued to thin as he tried to recall the important thing... He was liquefying.

Sometimes he could see glimpses of hair blond as wheat...and a smile as warm as the sun. Flashes of memories.

But...he had no idea who it was...even when he scraped through his thoughts.

He was getting sleepy. His consciousness was slipping away.

His body was weakening.

And...he started not to care about what would happen to him.

Someone gazed at him with sad eyes through blond hair...but he couldn't care less.

All he knew was that he was tired. He was so drowsy...so incredibly sleepy...

Rintarou stopped resisting.

He handed over his own existence to the great darkness, letting it take him until he slipped away.

"Rintarou!"

Someone had called out in a world of darkness. The voice was loud and clear.

Something brushed up against his hand, which he thought had already been taken away from him.

"!"

It was...

—

Nayuki battled Sir Tristan.

Felicia and Sir Gawain struggled against Sir Mordred.

They fought well.

Even in this hopeless place, even when they were crushed, they didn't lose heart. They didn't give up. They fought desperately.

But the enemy continued to dominate them.

"Hah...! Hff...!"

Nayuki dashed through the snow, leaving a red trail behind her.

She was no longer as light as a snowshoe hare.

"Ah—'Ice spirits, come together—'"

She sprinted, pounced, twirled, turned her right hand to her back. That was when her right thigh and left shoulder were burned from arrows that sliced into her like lasers. Light burst through the area.

"Gah—?!" Nayuki was blasted away, flung through air.

Blood splattered.

If she hadn't protected herself with a thin layer of ice, her hands and legs would have been ripped off her body.

"Cough... Ugh...!"

Her body bounced off the ground. She curled up in a fetal position.

From all directions, ammunition showered over her.

She had no escape.

The arrows touched her skin...

CRAAAAAAASH!

Her body was reduced into fragments of ice, scattering into pieces.

Icy Moon Mirror.

"Th-that was a close one...!"

Applying pressure on her bloody shoulder and leg, real Nayuki emerged from a different location, turning to stare at Sir Tristan.

But he wasn't where she last saw him.

"Wha—?!"

"You've already shown me that move."

The greeting came from behind Nayuki.

"Gh?!"

Her entire body chilled. Her hand formed an ice sword as she turned around to swing it.

"Sorry." Sir Tristan brought down his sword at precisely the same time.

Her paltry sword shattered.

He tried to rip diagonally through Nayuki as she scrambled to get away.

"Arghhhhhhhh?!"

Blood sprayed magnificently. She shrieked in agony.

It was a shallow wound. It wasn't fatal, but it was a serious injury.

"W-winter Storm!"

Nayuki frantically leaped back, discharging a biting wind that caused their surroundings to freeze. It spiraled.

If he had been a normal person, it would have turned his blood into ice and killed him in a split second.

But it only chilled the surface layer of Sir Tristan, who was protected by his concentrated Aura. Without even flinching, he stepped into the current of death, pursuing Nayuki with his almost divine speed.

"I'll finish you." He hunted down Nayuki, flashing his sword twice.

It severed the tendon in her right hand and slit her right knee.

"Ah—"

Her whole body went limp. Her blood stained the snow when her knees buckled.

She tumbled from the force...until she lay faceup to the sky.

"...Hah... Hff... Hff..."

She had pulled every trick to stave him off, but she had reached her limit.

She had exhausted her mana. She had sustained critical damage and succumbed to exhaustion.

Nayuki couldn't even stand or lift a finger.

The battle was over.

Not that it had been a real fight from the start.

Her dainty body used to be as dazzling as an icicle. Now it was battered.

"Yaaaay! Giving up, you bitch?" Hitoshi yelled gleefully when he saw her in her pitiful state. "You see that? I'm strong! And this is what happens to people who disobey me! Do you get it now?"

".....Cough..."

Nayuki hacked up a little blood, shaking.

She didn't have enough energy to come up with a single thing to say to him.

"Welp... Looks like their fight is almost done..."

Hitoshi looked up.

THUD. Something crashed into the snow.

Sir Gawain.

The daggers impaling his body leaked a red Aura. He was unconscious. It was a miracle he hadn't perished.

Sir Mordred quietly approached him.

"...Ah... Ugh..."

Her right hand carried Felicia—limp and hanging on to her consciousness by a thread. Her body was smeared in blood, gored by blades. Her breath came out in whispers.

Sir Mordred gripped the white sword in her left hand.

The blood trickling down Felicia's skin trailed through the air, drawn to the blade...which was glowing a brighter shade of red by the minute.

"...That was something. You're finally a real knight." Sir Mordred looked down at Sir Gawain, who had sustained far more damage than Felicia.

"...Ugh... I can't believe it..." Felicia wept tears of frustration, groaning in anguish.

"Um...? Reika? Y-you...seem different...?" Hitoshi noted.

"Don't worry about it."

Her condensed Aura made him shudder, but she didn't seem to care.

"About our promise. I can finish them off, right?"

Sir Mordred held up Felicia, who was slumped over, grazing her neck with the white sword.

"Uh-huh..."

But then it seemed he had a moment of revelation. He looked back and forth between Felicia and Nayuki.

"Huh... They're pretty cute, even though they have no brain cells."

He was thinking something over in silence...

"You know what? I take it back! Don't kill them! I'll take them in—as slaves!"

He was saying something criminal. He broke into a vulgar grin.

"...Huh?!"

".....Gh!"

Nayuki's and Felicia's faces paled. They were speechless.

"S-stop...joking...around...! I'd...rather...die...!" Felicia managed to say.

But he ignored her.

"Nice. This was actually on my bucket list. It seems like a very kingly privilege..."

That was when he noticed Sir Mordred, Sir Tristan, and Sir Dinadan were glaring at him. If looks could kill, he would be dead.

"Wh-what?! You have something to say?! I'm a king! Which means I can do anything I want...! You're just vassals! You can't look at me like that!"

"Master Hitoshi is right."

There was one person who affirmed him. Morgan.

"E-Elaine?! I'm not cheating on you or anything! Just so you know! This is just for fun..."

"I know. A true king should be surrounded by women... It's called being resourceful... That won't change my loyalty toward you, Master Hitoshi."

"R-right! I knew you'd understand! Ha-ha-ha!"

"These conquered girls are already yours... How about I engrave a *Carved Seal for Control* into them...? Ha-ha-ha..."

Morgan chuckled with Hitoshi. Her smile was devilish—like she had succeeded in tricking him with a loophole in the rules. But Hitoshi did not notice.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! See? Told you! Sir Tristan! We're bringing those girls home! Tie them up! Find Luna! I'm going to make her mine, too! She's really cheeky, so she'll have to learn her place! What're you doing?! That was an order—Jacks aren't allowed to deny a royal order! That's your purpose as a Jack!"

".....!"

Sir Tristan reluctantly trudged over to Nayuki, who remained crumpled on the ground.

"...Rin...ta...rou...I'm...sorry..."

All she could do was mutter in regret...

"...Please...kill...me...", Felicia whispered to Sir Mordred, begging her. "I don't...want...that dreadful boy...to toy with...my body..."

Sir Mordred looked at Felicia with narrowed eyes...

"I was planning on it... Your death won't be in vain."

Sir Mordred inched the white blade toward her chest...

"Huh?!"

"Wha...?!"

FZT... There was a sudden weight that hung heavy over the courtyard.

"Is this evil energy...?!"

Black bolts of lightning flooded the sky, crashing down on Sir Tristan and Sir Mordred like a group of serpents with unhinged jaws.

Sir Mordred immediately hurled Felicia aside and jumped back. Sir Tristan similarly vaulted away from Nayuki, just barely missing getting caught by the maw of a black serpent.

The middle of the battlefield was the landing ground of a Fomorian who was plunging down from the heavens, exuding an inky Aura and a commanding presence.

It was...

"...What's up, guys? Hanging in there?"

"Rintarou...?!"

"Rintarou...!"

...Rintarou Magami.

He had already invoked his transformation. His Aura curled around his armor.

Golden eyes glittered through the darkness, glinting ominously. On his chest hung the *hawthorn pendant in the shape of a Celtic cross*.

"...Sorry I'm late."

"?!"

Rintarou already had Nayuki tucked under his arm and stood next to Felicia and Sir Gawain.

Sir Tristan and Sir Mordred had failed to catch his movements.

"R-Rintarou...?"

"I'm sorry... This is all my fault for taking my time."

Felicia blinked at him, failing to process the situation.

There was something...different about him.

His creeping Aura was the same...but he had changed somehow.

It was like a burden had been lifted from his shoulders... He seemed lighter.

And she never imagined she would live to see him apologize.

"Good... You came back... That makes me happy..."

Held in his arms, Nayuki looked up at him, tears trickling down her face.

"*Welcome home...Rintarou...*"

He offered her a soft smile. "*I'm back...* Let me clean this up. Wait here."

He laid her gently on the ground, yanking out his swords as he approached the enemy.

"...Ha-ha-ha-ha... I didn't think you were still around...!" Hitoshi barked at him like a dog. "There's nothing you can do now! Are you implying you still don't know I'm powerful?!"

Rintarou ignored him, stalking toward Hitoshi in silence.

For a moment, Hitoshi forgot that his Excalibur offered him an impenetrable defense. He shuddered. Rintarou was that terrifying.

Hitoshi shrank back a step. And then another. "Dammit...! What are you doing?! Sir Tristan! Reika Tsukuyomi! Get him! Aren't you my vassals?! Kill that dumbass!"

They responded to Hitoshi's order.

"...As you wish."

"Hmph! I was already planning on it...!"

Sir Tristan and Sir Mordred blocked Rintarou.

"I'm glad you didn't run away, Rintarou Magami... Merlin!"

"....."

"Killing you is the only thing I have to do! Prepare yourself!" Sir Mordred declared, enlarging her Aura.

"...Shut up, crony. I'm tired of small talk... Come at me."

Rintarou didn't seem to pay much attention to her.

"Just to warn you...I'm ticked off right now... Beat up my friends, and you deal with me. Don't think I'll go easy on you, lackeys."

"Can it! And feel my power for yourself... Clarent!"

Sir Mordred and Sir Tristan moved.

"They're fast!" Felicia screeched, eyes wide.

They were like rockets, unleashing shock waves as the two knights went straight for Rintarou.

"Hah....." Rintarou just let out a quiet breath. "Luna..."

He squeezed the hawthorn cross at his chest and closed his eyes.

—

“—Rintarou!”

In the ocean abyss, Rintarou’s molten consciousness suddenly resurfaced.

Something had brushed up against his hand, a limb that he thought was already gone. His awareness seemed to sharpen.

He couldn’t remember...who this voice belonged to...

But it triggered a nostalgic feeling. He knew this was a voice he’d wanted to hear.

“—Wake up, Rintarou! Open your eyes!”

...You’re so damn loud...

“—Can you hear me?! Get up! Come back to me! Aren’t you my vassal?!”

...I said...you’re noisy... Your shrill voice is making my head pound...

“—Don’t you want to come home?! Are you going to just stay in this sad place forever?!”

...Of course not... Just leave me alone...

“Stop dodging the question! What do you want to do?!”

.....

The insistent voice made Rintarou go silent for a while.

For some reason, his mind drifted off to a hazy memory of a blond girl flashing him a brilliant smile. He thought about a crew of people gathered around her. He couldn’t bring himself to hate them.

Rintarou absentmindedly watched the scene float in the darkness.

...I want to go home...

Thump. He felt like something in his heart had grounded itself.

That’s right... I want to go home...but I can’t go back anymore...

That was when he realized the truth.

He was flooded by a sense of loss. He despaired over something he couldn’t regain.

I couldn’t go back. My fate was to vanish.

I had been such a fool.

I had been in search of something and gotten rejected, only to seek it out again, only to be denied for a second time, leaving me despondent. I had pretended to be stronger and gotten pushed away, and then I put on airs, only to get thrown away again, only to get hurt, leaving me totally isolated.

It left me stubborn, mulish, obstinate...until I started to actually believe that I didn’t need anyone else. That, in fact, I *liked* being alone. That everyone else was my little toy. I refused to let go of this stupid front.

I finally found somewhere that accepted me for me, nastiness and all. A place where I belonged.

How could I let that go?

Why hadn’t I protected it with every fiber of my being?

Why had it taken me plunging into a sea of despair to have this revelation?

Why couldn’t I keep it close to my heart—in the ancient era and now?

There was no end to my list of rejects.

I was an irredeemable idiot.

Dammit...

If I had a physical form...I would have wept like a pathetic kid.

"—It's okay," someone said. "Rintarou...I'm sure you'll be able to come back to me...if that's what you want."

Why do you know that...?

"Because you promised."

...Promised what?

That didn't ring any bells. I couldn't remember swearing on anything.

"...You're going to dash to my side when I'm king of the whole world, remember? You're going to stay by me. You might have a rebellious side, but I know you keep your promises."

...Huh? I don't remember you becoming king of the world...

"Not yet. But it's going to happen, which means the contract still stands. If you go against it, I'll execute you."

The voice didn't seem to have any sense of shame nor did it shy away from capital punishment.

Ha-ha-ha...

I realized I was laughing. It was all I could do.

I would hate...for you to execute me...

"...Right? Then you've got to come back. Pronto."

Right. Right.

I needed to go back. I needed to go home...to her.

I didn't have time to be absorbed by darkness or drowned by the sea.

I needed to go home. No, I *wanted* to go home.

I'm coming back! I'm returning to her—to Luna!

I finally remembered the name of who was hiding behind the fog.

That was when I gripped the sensation that had emerged in my palm.

And it released a blinding light.

"What...?!"

I squinted at the radiant ray as it drove away the darkness.

I wasn't in the ocean abyss anymore.

Sunlight poured down on me. Clear blue waves filled my eyes. I was floating in a sea of light.

"...Huh?!"

My body had come back. It should have vanished between the seaweed, been devoured by the void.

In my hand was the Celtic cross made of hawthorn.

It was the pendant I had gotten from Luna.

"I-impossibllllllllllllllllllle!"

Id was in front of me, struggling against the light and writhing in pain.

"Dammit! That pendant! From that wretched woman! When will she get bored of foiling my plans?!"

There was no need for me to respond.

I brandished my swords and charged at Id, hacking straight into him.

"Shut up! AND GET OUTTTTTTTTTTTTTT!"

"—Ah?!"

Id couldn't dodge my sword in his weakened state, battered by the sun.

Crashing down with all my strength, my sword...ripped through him. It was the perfect swing.

"Geez...*cough*... You're horrible...pal..."

With my sword plunged deep in his chest, Id smiled wickedly at me from up close.

"Gh... I guess...there's no way around it... I'll leave for now...and let you hold the reins..."

He chuckled the golden eyeball at me.

It seeped into my palm, manifesting into a pattern of a creepy eye on the front and back of my hand.

"Remember...my defeat is only temporary..."

"....."

"You're going to kill Arthur. Even if you're friends. Even if you're lovers... And that's a promise. I can predict the future! That's our fate...our situation... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I can't wait to see your dumb face when it happens, Merlin...! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

His body dissolved into black mist, leaving behind me and his curse.

"My fate...? I'll crush our stupid destiny."

"...Yeah?" Id asked.

For a brief moment, he looked like he was losing his mind.

"...Okay... Well... Try your best... I expect good things... Ha-ha-ha..."

And then Id completely vanished.

The light poured down on me stronger...until it bathed the entire world in white. And I could feel my consciousness starting to surface...

"—Gh?!"

Rintarou had come to his senses in the nurse's office.

He was splayed out over the magic circle, the door to his netherworld.

In his hand was the hawthorn cross Luna had given him.

"I'm...back..."

He realized something heavy was on top of him.

"Zzz...zzz..."

It was Luna. She was on top of Rintarou, snoring gently.

She held a hawthorn cross that matched his.

"...Hmm? This is..."

The cross looked old and shabby. It couldn't have been made recently by an amateur. It looked like someone else had made it more than ten years ago...

Luna gripped it like it was precious, slumbering peacefully.

"Heh! I made it myself! To strengthen our friendship, Rintarou. Even if we're separated, we'll reunite as long as you have this pendant... There's no better gift for a vassal! Do you like it?"

“...I owe her one.”

Rintarou put her back in bed.

“Leave the rest up to me, my king. I’ll protect you and your friends.”

He evaporated from the room like mist.

—

“Geez... You—”

Rintarou was out there...

“...You’re so weak! YOU WIMPS!”

...He swung his swords indiscriminately.

“GAAAAH?!”

“AAAAAH?!”

The air quaked from the booming of two shock waves.

Sir Tristan and Sir Mordred were blown away. It was almost comical.

They slammed into the wall of a building after rebounding off the dirt.

“I’m not even disappointed that you’re so weak. It’s laughable.”

“Gh—i-impossible...! This! This can’t be...!”

Sir Mordred climbed out of a pile of crumbled concrete, trying to invoke Clarent’s power. Aura pulsed out of her body.

“I’ve got the power of King Arthur in my hands...! I’ll make sure you—”

“What?! What’s that?!” Rintarou called out, pursuing her with such speed as if he’d teleported.

He yanked her up by the collar and vaulted into the air.

“RAAAAAH!”

“GAAAAAH?!”

Rintarou smashed her onto the ground as if he were spiking a volleyball.

“Hh... Grah!”

Something exploded. The surroundings caved into a crater. The earth cracked, gorged out with each rebound as she landed.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

Rintarou hit her with a no-trap direct volley shot, sending her flying like a ball.

The goal post was the west wing behind Hitoshi.

It smashed in half, crumbling like it had been blasted away by a detonation on a construction site.

“Wh-what is...he...?”

Hitoshi paled, watching the monster cloaked in Aura rampage.

“Amazing...,” muttered Felicia, crawling on her hands and knees. “I’ve never seen anything like it... Not even from Rintarou...”

She couldn’t hide her hesitation.

“That’s weird... Maybe...I’m off my game...”

Felicia used to think his power was petrifying. There had been a sinister quality about it.

It wasn’t just because it was unimaginably powerful. She felt it had come from evil, something that shouldn’t have been touched by humans. It was grotesque...and sick.

"He's stronger than ever... So why am I not scared of him? ...In fact, it's the opposite..."

What could have changed about Rintarou? What was making her feel this way, even though he was violently rampaging?

Felicia gaped, continuing to ponder the true character of his power.

"Who's next—?"

Sir Mordred had been buried in the debris of the collapsed building.

Rintarou shot a glare in her direction before turning around.

Arrows saturated the sky, whizzing toward him.

Sir Tristan's Buffer Bow.

"Ha! Buffer Bow? Yeah, right. Trash!"

Rintarou's twin swords came crashing down. He twirled them around to repel and strike the approaching arrows.

Flashes of light flickered in the night sky.

"Gaaah!"

But Sir Tristan didn't stop firing, continuing to shoot his rounds even faster than he'd shot them in his battle with Nayuki, trying to hold back Rintarou.

"I said...it's in vaaaain!"

Rintarou launched himself off the ground, sprinting. With each step, he gouged through the dirt, knocking down all the arrows coming toward him.

They could have ignited an armored vehicle with a critical hit, but they didn't slow him down at all.

He closed the distance between them, traveling across dozens of yards in an instant.

"Take that!"

Two flashes from his pair of swords, followed by a crushing sound.

He had obliterated Sir Tristan's bow.

"N-no way..."

"Hmm?! What a wimpy artifact!" Rintarou punted him through the air and then raced after him. "You think you're all that...but you're all nobodies...! I'll make you pay for walking around like you own the damn place...!"

"AAAAH?!"

"I can't believe they got beat up by you... I can't take it! AAAH! I'm pissed off! That was my last straw!"

He caught up to Sir Tristan, who flew through the air...

"And I'm so upset...that I couldn't protect them from weaklings! That really gets to me!"

Rintarou swung his sword to cut off Sir Tristan's head.

Sir Tristan immediately righted himself, unsheathing his blade.

They collided with each other, parrying from a close distance. Rintarou's swords sparred against Sir Tristan's.

"Gah?!"

The impact rippled through Sir Tristan, making him spit up blood.

"Didn't you say you were the mightiest of the Round Table?!"

Rintarou's weapons shot against him like bolts of lightning.

"I think it's time for you to give up that title!"

Rintarou smashed into Sir Tristan with his sword, swiping, lobbing, jabbing.

His weapons stormed, coming down harder and faster than the drums in a death metal band.

Sir Tristan barely managed to block him.

"Gah?! AAAAAH?!"

He couldn't keep up appearances anymore. He was outmatched.

With each blow, his body vibrated from the shock, causing his bones to creak. He was getting slapped around like a puppet in a comedy routine.

"AAAAAAAH!"

Rintarou didn't display any mercy, exhaustive in his attempts to rip him up, swinging his sword to crash into Sir Tristan, fending him off, slicing into him, colliding into him, mowing him down, surging up to finish his swing...

"THIS IS YOUR END!"

His left sword flashed, thrusting forward.

SPLASH! Blood sprayed. There was the dull sound of flesh ripping as Sir Tristan's armor was smashed in.

Rintarou's sword had impaled Sir Tristan's chest.

From force, he had let go of it, letting it stick out of Sir Tristan's chest as he was blasted backward like a rocket.

"Gaaah?!"

Sir Tristan was pinned to the wall of the east wing's fourth floor like an insect specimen.

"*Cough...* I-is this...what...Merlin...is...?!"

Sir Tristan hacked up blood, immobile, staring at Rintarou, who glared with cutthroat eyes.

Those eyes burned with passion, triggering Rintarou's Aura to erupt.

But it didn't have the ominous quality that it possessed during the legendary era...

Rintarou was fueled by righteous indignation. His friends had gotten hurt. He was blazing with purpose to protect them from getting hurt again. His rage was justified, manifesting for those he held dear.

He was completely divorced from evil. In fact, there was a lightness about him.

"...*Cough...* A tragedy..." Sir Tristan hacked up blood as a sarcastic smile spread across his face. "I...was summoned to serve the role of villain. Of course I'd never win... Ha-ha-ha..."

He chuckled.

"...I...just...don't...care...about...anything...anymore..."

Once known as the strongest knight of the Round Table, Sir Tristan disappeared into a mist of mana.

"Hmph... You might have had a fighting chance if you had been summoned by someone better," Rintarou said, turning his back to what remained of Sir Tristan.

Silence.

It was like the battle never happened.

"All right..." Rintarou sighed and turned around.

"Wh-why...? What just happened...?!"

He looked at Hitoshi, who was quivering and retreating.

"Why...why am I losing...?! What's going on?! Sir Tristan and Reika Tsukuyomi are useless!"

Hitoshi turned to his side, clinging to the person next to him.

"E-Elaine! What do I do?! H-help me, pl—"

But Elaine disappeared without a trace.

"Elaine...? ...Wh-where did you go...?"

Hitoshi looked lost.

"Before we get to the main event, I've got business to settle with you..."

Rintarou fixed an annoyed look on Hitoshi.

"But you're cheating with that scabbard... Tch, what am I gonna do?"

"O-oh, right!"

It looked like a light bulb went off in Hitoshi's head, as he raised something that had been hanging off his hip with his shaking hands.

A scabbard.

"I've got the Steel Sheath of Undying Defense! You might act like you have something on me, but you won't even be able to hurt a hair on my head! Serves you right!"

That was when something happened.

"Huh...?"

Rintarou suddenly realized something.

He narrowed his eyes, zeroing in on the scabbard that Hitoshi proudly hoisted up.

Felicia and Nayuki were scrutinizing it, too. It appeared they were on the same page.

"Hmm...? Your scabbard..." Rintarou started. "...Ha!"

He burst into a fit of laughter.

"Ha-ha-ha... Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...! Ha! Hmm? I get it now! ...Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He clutched his stomach, wheezing.

"Wh-what's so funny?!"

"Oh... I think I might know who that witch is."

"Huh?"

"HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA! A masterpiece! Oh, this is good! It's the *same* trick again! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Rintarou laughed wildly...as a girl in black stood along the edge of a cliff, facing the sea at Sword Lake Beachside Park.

...Morgan.

“...‘Arthur. Never will I forgive you, the one who killed my beloved. Feel my malice. I care not what events befall me. Never shall ye have this scabbard.’”

Morgan recited a line from John Sheep’s *Last Round Arthur*, chucking something rod-shaped into the ocean.

SPLASH!

When that object hit the water...it disappeared, melting into the sea.

“‘Morgan stole the enchanted scabbard from her younger brother, Arthur, and *replaced it with a replica*. And she threw the scabbard into the deepest reaches of the lake. For it was forged of gold and precious stones, it sunk into the water, never to arise again. King Arthur’s magic scabbard had been lost for eternity.’”

Morgan giggled.

“Hee-hee-hee... Ha-ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Your act is done, Hitoshi! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

She showed no shame as she laid bare her wickedness.

“You did well. Merlin is stronger from the fight with Sir Tristan. I wish he’d held out longer... But I never thought that virgin would satisfy me anyway.”

Morgan let her cloak billow in the wind as she took her leave.

“I’ve never been closer to my wish... If Merlin can take back his power... Hee-hee... What should I do next...?”

She dissolved into the darkness...

“Looks like you’ve gotten yourself involved with a bad girl... My condolences!”

Rintarou gave Hitoshi a few hardy slaps on the back, grinning from ear to ear.

“As long as you keep your scabbard with you, no one can steal it... Which means the opposite holds true... You gotta watch out for honeypots!”

“Wh-what are you saying...?”

“By the way, Hitoshi, I heard you saying some interesting things about my friends. After you beat them up, I think you said you were planning on making them your slaves? Ha-ha-ha! Wow. I can’t wait to smash my fist into your face!”

His Aura oozed out...curling around Hitoshi.

“Wh-what...do you think you’re doing...?!”

“Nothing to see here! I’m just strengthening your body with Aura!”

“What?!” Hitoshi couldn’t figure out his intentions. “Wh-what’s with you?! Why would you do that?!”

“Because you’re just so shrimp. Duh. I think I could kill you with a gentle shove. I want you to die, but I’d get an earful from my king if I killed you unnecessarily.”

Grinning a heretic’s smile, Rintarou continued to channel more power into Hitoshi.

"Oh..." Felicia seemed to be skeeved out when she realized what he was doing.

"Ha-ha-ha... Um... Rintarou... Don't take it too far," warned Nayuki, sweating.

"What?! Are you an idiot?! I just told you I've got my Excalibur! Do you understand Japanese?! Hellooo?" Hitoshi shouted.

"All right, I think I'm done. Let's start..." Rintarou seemed gleeful when he squeezed his fist. "DON'T YOU EVER SHOW YOUR FACE HERE AGAIN!"

He used his entire body as he slung Hitoshi with an uppercut, fist soaring like a rising dragon.

"BLERGH?!"

Hitoshi blasted into the sky like fireworks.

He twirled through the air. Eventually, as though he were a certain saint with a constellation theme, he slammed into a corner of the courtyard.

FWOOM! The dirt was pushed out to create another crater...

"Gah... Hah. Bleh..."

Hitoshi's eyes rolled to the back of his head. He went silent.

He looked like a complete loser. His face was misshapen. His bones were fractured, limbs bent in unnatural angles. He had narrowly escaped death. Liquid leaked out of his front and back holes. A living hell.

It would take six months for him to make a complete recovery.

It didn't put his life in danger... But he might have been better off dead.

"Whew! Love to blow off steam. Ha-ha-ha."

Rintarou looked like he was a new man as he beamed.

"...Oh... I thought he'd changed, but I guess he'll always stay the same." Felicia eyed him with disgust.

"Ha-ha-ha..." Nayuki recoiled, a superficial smile plastered to her face.

"Well, I'm all filled up on those crappy hors d'oeuvres. How about I go for the main dish...?" Rintarou turned around. "This isn't over yet. Right, *Mordred?*"

He was facing a pile of rubble in the west wing when he called out to her. "Are you ready to fight me seriously? I'm guessing we have a lot to air out between us..."

As if to reply, the mountain of debris exploded, unleashing an Aura.

An aurora dyed the night bloodred.

"Obviously!"

Someone stood in the middle of the shooting rubble.

Sir Mordred.

"Merlin...! *Merlin!* MERLIN! I can't lose against you! Not to an egotistical heretic!"

"Heh! If you've got something to say, say it with your sword!" Rintarou barked.

"AAAAAAAHH!" Sir Mordred howled, swinging her white blade.

Her compressed Aura seemed to expand, multiplying. The crimson aurora swept up, threatening heaven, roaring into an eddying storm that swept through the area.

"Clarent! I need more! Give me more power! GAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Sir Mordred's Clarent sinisterly radiated crimson from the drawn blood, breaking its limits to channel more strength into her.

"—Ngh! Does she have more power?"

The battle defied all comprehension. Felicia was stunned.

"Rintarou..." Nayuki watched him go, praying...

"...This is the final showdown, Sir Mordred."

Sir Dinadan had a complex expression on his face, continuing to watch Sir Mordred from somewhere.

"To replenish its power...you even let it take long drags of your own blood... Tell me I'm wrong!" shouted Rintarou. "You carry King Arthur's blood in your veins, too! Right, Mordred?"

The crimson Aura pummeled Rintarou as he continued to calmly stare at Sir Mordred.

"That's suicidal. Satiating your hunger by eating your own flesh—"

"MEEEEEEERLIIIIIN!"

BAM! Breaking the sound barrier, Sir Mordred pressed in on Rintarou.

KLANG! The sword over her head swung down, stopped by Rintarou as he crossed his weapons over his head.

The impact broke into a storm, gouging the earth and making it rumble.

Their Auras collided, detonating red and black lightning that wrestled against each other and spread a storm of destruction.

"Are they at a standstill?! Is he finally getting overpowered?"

"Rintarou!"

Felicia and Nayuki were in his periphery.

Sir Mordred and Rintarou struggled against each other, meeting each other with their swords, glaring at each other from a close distance.

"Merlin! Why did you do it?! Why did you enthrone...Father...? Why Arthur...?!" Sir Mordred exploded at him, full of fury and resentment.

"...Gh?!"

Rintarou froze in place.

"Arthur—Father—wasn't fit to be king! And you knew that! You know what happened to Logres after you disappeared! You know what transpired during the last days of Britain...!"

Rintarou was silent, his expression bitter.

That was right. Rintarou knew what she was talking about. Merlin knew.

King Arthur was not the knight king of justice as told by the modern world.

He had certainly united his allies, defeated his foes, accomplished many quests, and continued to protect the people. He had been a hero who'd succeeded in great undertakings.

His feats and contributions weren't fabrications.

Maybe they could blame his exhaustion. He had fought more battles with enemy countries than he could count.

Or maybe they could blame his burden of responsibilities. After all, he had to protect a territory that had grown too large...

Or maybe it had been his arrogance, caused by exorbitant amounts of glory and prosperity...

...But something had turned King Arthur into a crook, steadily and silently.

Take for example when the great Celtic hero Fionn mac Cumhaill had murdered Diarmuid Ua Duibhne. He had lost the support of the Fianna warrior group and their cohesive power.

Any hero would always have their decline.

And King Arthur was no exception.

"My father started to host meaningless tournaments! He started to have extravagant banquets for no occasion! He pressured the treasury to hand over more money! And that tab was paid by taxing the people!"

Rintarou fended himself from Sir Mordred's sword. She took another swipe at him.

He quietly stopped her swing, pushing it back.

"That wasn't all! I'm the product of Arthur and his own sister! My entire existence is repulsive! And to save himself, he killed all the children born on the same day as me! Do you think a king should do that? He should be protecting the people!"

".....Ngh?!"

Sir Mordred tried to mow him down with her sword, attempting to rip apart his shoulder. He hit her weapon away, quiet.

"And to restore his country from impoverishment, he tried to reverse the damage by seeking out the Holy Grail! He claimed the chalice would bring prosperity. And he ignored me when I told him not to rely on it to fix his problems!"

She hacked forward, trying to lacerate him. Rintarou parried, holding his ground as the impact rang through his body.

"We lost so many knights to that stupid quest! And the kingdom hadn't been in worse shape! Enemy nations were eyeing us. Apparitions became more active. And then his little bubble burst—and there was no more peace! The country was in chaos!"

".....Gh!"

"So save me your little speeches! 'Mordred, the traitor!' 'Mordred, the one who destroyed the kingdom!' Really?! Is that how things played out?!"

"—Ngh!"

She pushed him back with her sword, forcing him to take his distance, before swinging her blade up. She hacked into him.

Her furious strikes crashed into his weapon, trying to get through.

Rintarou continued to parry in silence.

"I just wanted to save it!"

The weight and passion of her swings spoke her truth.

"Call me a traitor! Call me a disgrace! I just wanted to save the kingdom from going to ruin! I wanted to protect the people from an unfit king! They were praising him like some hero because he did some good in the past... while the country was drowning under his rule...! I wanted to do it for my home...!"

That was why Sir Mordred had started the rebellion.

That was why she had lashed out at King Arthur.

Her methods were controversial. The consequences were nothing worthy of praise. It hadn't even gone according to her plan, and she had been followed by a black mark for generations.

But even then, Sir Mordred had stood up for her kingdom and its people in her own way.

King Arthur was remembered as a great hero in spite of his decline.

And no one could imagine going against someone like that.

If anything, they would imagine themselves as his dutiful followers and turn a blind eye to his bad side.

Which was why someone needed to defy him, turn their fangs on him.

There was a need for a new age. They needed to air out the bad.

That was why Sir Mordred had done what she did.

".....Gh!"

Rintarou kept staving off her sword. He was remembering a bittersweet memory.

It was from the legendary era. He had been deceived by someone from the Dame du Lac, sealed away, and made nothing but a spectator of the events that transpired.

"Ahhh, Merlin...I can't do this anymore... I can't stand it any longer..."

"Everyone only sees me as the king... No one knows me for me..."

"...I'm exhausted... Without you, I'm... Ah..."

"I want to see you... I want to see you one more time...Merlin..."

"Why...did I ever become the king...?"

Rintarou had suddenly recalled seeing his closest friend hanging his head on his throne by himself.

"Merlin, you're a prophet! You should have seen the limits of his abilities as king!"

"I did."

"But you crowned him!"

"I know. I made him king."

"... 'Now, boy. Our young king. On this most holy day of our Lord and Savior, you must pull this sword from the stone,' said Merlin."

"'Ye there, Sir Ector, must understand this already. This boy had been born to this world the rightwise king of Britain and ruler of the entire world.'"

"'Ye lord, ye knight, bear witness. Christ, born onto this night, will show us a miracle to point at who the rightwise king of this realm is to be.'"

“...Gh! Merlin! I’ll ask you this now!”

Her intensity almost blasted his emotions away. She thrust her sword at him.

“Why...did you make him king?! Why did you make Arthur square off with Excalibur?! WHY?!”

Her scream could break eardrums, carrying over a thousand miles.

Blade gritted into blade.

Sparks from their impact pushed away the darkness.

“...The reason...why...I helped him become king...was...”

In that moment, Rintarou recalled his memories of the previous age.

The Dame du Lac had wanted to make Arthur the savior of humanity.

But Merlin was the one who had taken up their request, guiding Arthur down this path. He could have told them that Arthur made a poor candidate. He could have said he just didn’t have it in him.

“...Because it seemed like it’d be fun.”

She couldn’t read his emotions. Her eyes flashed with fury.

“To be honest, it was a little joke. I had a feeling I wouldn’t get bored around him...so I made him king. I didn’t think into it too deeply.”

“I see...! I knew it...!” She was bursting with rage.

Her Aura seemed to roll off her with increasing force and radiance.

“In that case—I really can’t forgive you! You...caused the downfall of the kingdom, MERLIN!”

She crashed into him with her sword. The air appeared to warp and twist.

Upon taking her hit with his twin blades, Rintarou was knocked back a dozen yards. His soles scraped through the soil as he skidded to a stop.

“Yeah... Maybe,” Rintarou muttered with his swords still readied. “... Yeah... Until now, I’ve blamed everyone except me for the collapse of the kingdom and the Round Table... But I was part of the cause...”

“You’re only realizing this now? Die to repent! I will bury your past blunders!”

Sir Mordred channeled more Aura into her sword—

“I will become the new king in his place! I will save this world! That’s why you have to die, Merlin!

—and brought it down on him.

At the eleventh hour, she had unleashed her mightiest swing. It could have cut through space itself. It spoke of every conviction in her soul.

It was an assault that even Merlin couldn’t defend himself from.

Metal screeched. Wind whipped around them from the impact. Dirt blasted skyward.

“Sorry, but—”

Rintarou obstructed her swing with his left sword.

“—I’m not going to die.”

Over their crossed blades, he fixed a stare on her.

“Wha—?!”

"I'll tell you one thing. I know you think Arthur wasn't fit for the throne, but he...was a real king."

He broke into a smile, letting an unexpectedly carefree grin stretch across his face. Even though they were battling to the death.

It was like he was bragging about his friend.

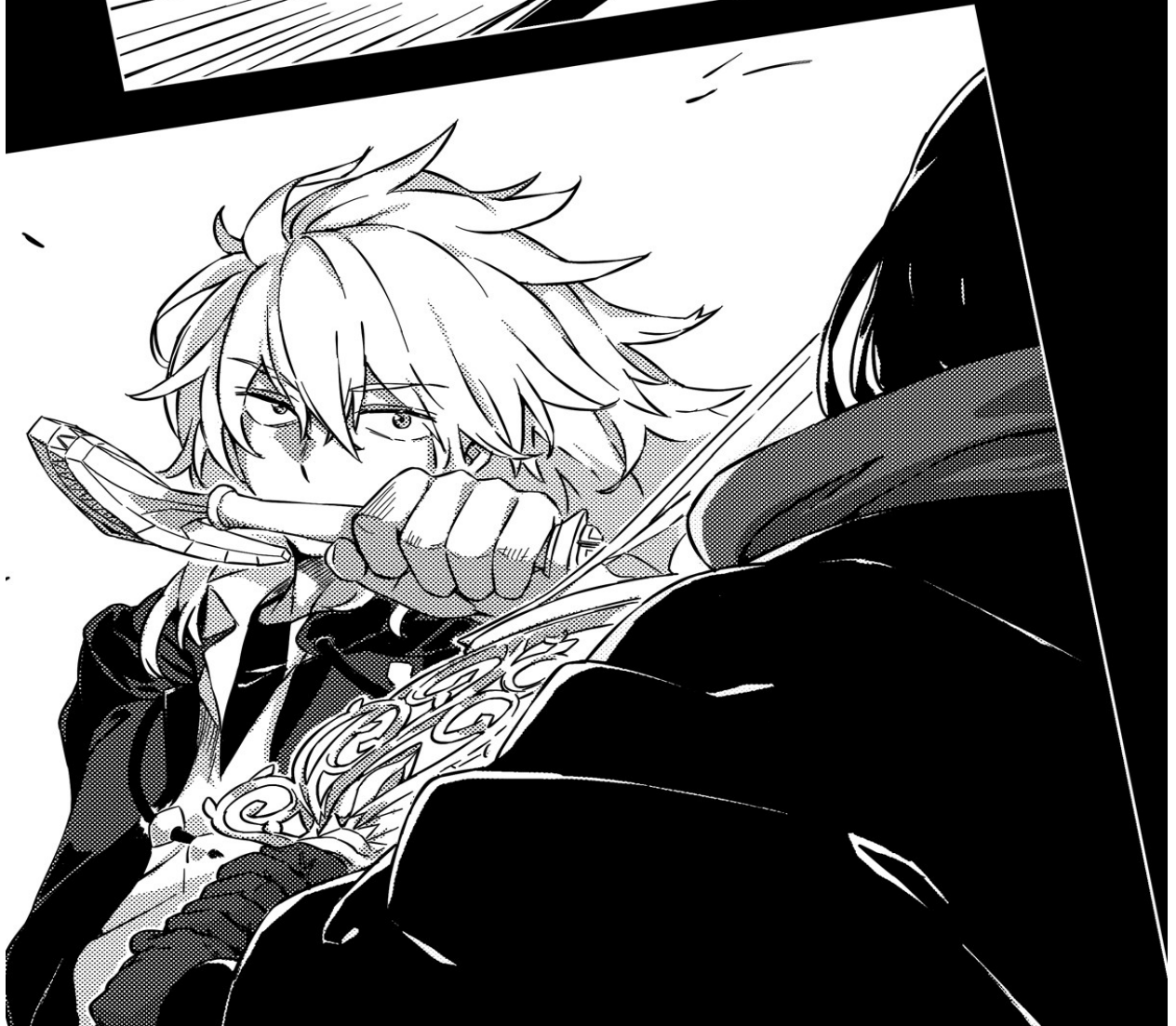
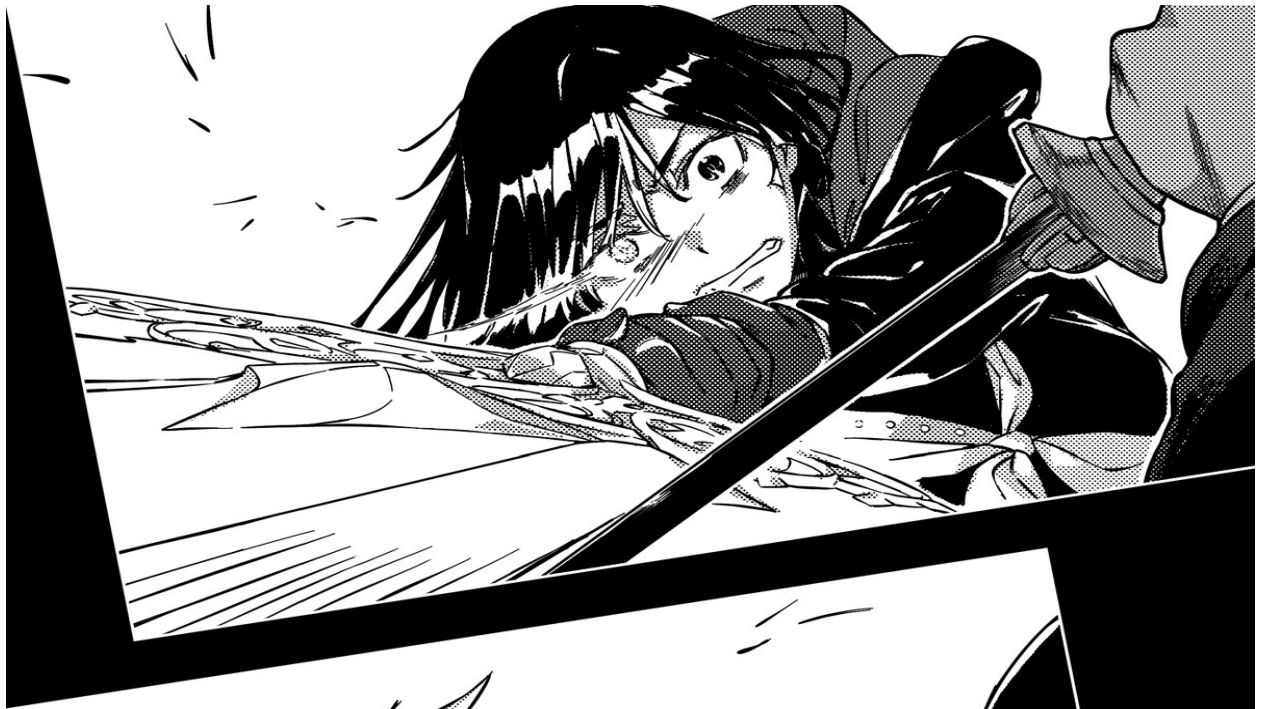
"I might have made him a king for shits and giggles at the beginning... but there wasn't anyone else more fit for the role in that era."

"....."

"Who else was there? He beat the eleven kings of Britain, united the country, escaped from the tyranny of the Roman Empire and ruled over them, stopped the invasion of the Saxon warrior, cleaned up the apparitions... Who else could have done those things? Could you?"

"I—I...!"

"Well... He wasn't the type to be king by himself... He was only worthy of the throne when he was supported by his friends. That was why—"



Rintarou looked straight at Sir Mordred.

"That was why I'm to blame in some ways. He became a fallen hero... because I couldn't be by his side until the very end... It's my fault... I'm genuinely sorry..."

"—Gh?!"

She hadn't expected this.

"...So that's why I'm going to be there...by her side. I'll watch Luna go down her road to becoming King. I'll show her the way.

"Ha-ha-ha... I realized I have fun with her. I realized I want to be by her side... I realized I want to make her king.

"I know it's stupid that it took a near-death experience for me to reach this revelation. I'll keep wielding my sword for her sake... I was going to use her at first...but I don't feel like doing that anymore. I don't know why."

"...Nonsense! How will *you* change anything? Are you saying she won't take a wrong turn like Arthur just because you're there?!"

"Shut up! No one is safe from making mistakes! That's why you've got friends!"

"—Ngh?!"

Sir Mordred was subdued by his rebuttal.

"Just so you know, kings and heroes aren't gods! They're human, like us, even if they're really strong! They make mistakes when they're tired like us! That's why they need people to support them! If Arthur went crazy, it was the responsibility of those around him, including me! Am I wrong?!"

"—GH?!"

His question gouged her heart.

Everyone worshipped Arthur as a king during their generation. Anyone would have served the great king as a knight, sworn their allegiance, and offered their sword to him. They had all been willing to be ruled by the great king as one of his people. They praised his name.

But had they seen him as "King" or as "Arthur"? Had they hoisted more burdens onto Arthur, pretending they were extensions of his responsibility as king? Had they coddled themselves by viewing him as merely a king?

If someone had seen Father as himself...and not the king...maybe his fall never would have happened. Could we have avoided that ruin? Sir Mordred suddenly realized.

Even she had never treated Arthur as a father. Had she even looked at the king with unbiased eyes? Had she ever considered...what he might have felt as they stood in a field of murder?

If Arthur had been the rightful king from the start... If someone had understood and supported him... If we could have avoided all ruin in that way...then I...I...

I could not accept it. I refused.

Because I wouldn't be able to stand anymore if I did.

Sir Mordred gnashed her teeth in irritation, which had no outlet.

Rintarou gently called out to her.

"Hey, Mordred... You want to save the world, right? You want to save it from the Catastrophe. You're worrying about the fate of this world in your own way."

"...Wh-what about it?!"

"In that case, why don't you draw back your sword? I think we can face the same direction together."

Revelation dawned on her.

"How do you expect me to believe you?!"

But Sir Mordred rejected him like a child.

"Merlin! You haven't changed one bit! I know you're just using Luna! Just like Arthur! People don't change! You're the same bastard who toyed and tricked people...like in the ancient era!"

"Mordred..."

"How can I withdraw now?! How can I trust you now?!"

"...All right. Come at me. Let's talk it out with our swords. This is our common language."

Rintarou solemnly raised his swords again.

"MEEEEERLIIIIIN!" Sir Mordred howled, vaulting off the ground.

She rushed at him with Clarent in hand, bursting with rage.

"I will become king and cleanse our paaast!"

"Come at me! I'll...face the future with her!"

Rintarou readied himself for Sir Mordred.

—

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

She charged toward him, vocal cords shredding as she howled, brandishing her sword.

Ten yards apart.

The seconds stretched forever. It was like she was drawing closer to him in slow motion.

Sir Mordred started to think...

—

"Gah!"

My nose stung from the metallic scent of blood in the middle of this atrocity.

Reika Tsukuyomi gurgled out blood, turning to me.

I'd never seen so much despair or confusion in someone's eyes.

I could understand why she was distressed...because I had been the one who stabbed her.

Clarent had impaled Reika Tsukuyomi's heart.

There was no saving her anymore. I had delivered a fatal wound.

"This...has...to...be...a...joke...! I'm...a King! And a Jack has no business defying a King. That's the rule...! Gah...!"

"Did you forget who I was?"

I gave my sword a sharp twist, sounding like I was pronouncing her death sentence.

"I'm Mordred. In the second seat. I rebelled against the king and killed him. I am the traitor... And I am the exception."

"...Gh?!"

"I cannot leave this in your hands. I will become a King in your place. To save this world. I will...take your body as mine."

As her life flickered out, Reika turned a ghastly smile on me.

"Fine... Try your best, sinner... Traitor... Ngh! We're...the...same... *Koff!*"

"!"

"You talk a big game, but...you're just like me... Another murderer..."

"No! Don't lump me in with you! I'm—"

Reika interrupted my excuses, chuckling.

"See you in hell...Mordred...!"

—

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

She charged toward him, vocal cords shredding as she howled, brandishing her sword.

Eight yards apart.

The seconds stretched forever.

Sir Mordred started to think...

That's right! I can't withdraw! If I retreat now, then what would I have been...?

—

"You're asking me to serve King Hitoshi Kataoka?"

"Yes." The witch in black had offered me a proposal and an enchanting smile. "You might have stolen Reika Tsukuyomi's body to become King... But her Round Fragment summoned Sir Dinadan... I think the odds are stacked against you."

"....." I glanced next to me.

There was my Jack...Sir Dinadan. There must have been some mix-up when he was summoned here. He looked at me, aloof.

Why had Sir Dinadan responded to my call at all?

I was the loathed enemy who'd murdered him.

"Like we discussed, it won't be easy to steal Hitoshi's blood. By joining his forces, I will secure an opportunity for you to go through with it."

"....."

"We have common interests. I would like for you to kill all the Kings. That's my only motivation."

"....."

"You've already committed a grave sin. You've murdered a king in cold blood in the previous age—and now... Isn't it too late for you to think twice about deceiving and betraying others?"

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

She charged toward him.

Six yards apart.
Sir Mordred started to think...
If I retreat now, then what was I...?

—

“Are you saying you’re bringing an insurrection against King Arthur, Sir Mordred?!”

“That’s right.”

Back in the ancient era.

On our quest for the Holy Grail, I confided in Sir Dinadan about my change of heart for the first time.

Even Sir Dinadan was perturbed by my confession.

“I—I never would have thought you were plotting something so awful...!”

“Oh, please, Sir Dinadan. I know you’re smart enough to figure out that our kingdom will be ruined. We’re already down the wrong path if we’re betting on this Holy Grail to save us! A chalice promising prosperity? Yeah, right!”

“B-but...”

“Look at our situation! Fellow members of the Round Table died for this stupid quest! We just lost Sir Ywain three days ago! Last week, Sir Melias! Who’s going to be next?! We’ve already lost enough of our knights!”

“B-but the king is...”

“We can’t leave this country in the hands of King Arthur, Sir Dinadan! I’m begging you as my guardian from childhood! Please help me out!”

“Sir Mordred...”

“If I have your support as the balancer, it will solidify my faction... And increase our chances of defeating him! So—”

“Wait. Wait. Please calm down, Sir Mordred. Cool your head. You haven’t talked about this to any others, right?”

Sir Dinadan chided my ardor.

“You’re still young. I understand why you’re impatient. The king has certainly changed... He doesn’t have much power and charisma anymore... But we still need him...”

Sir Dinadan offered a smile to placate me, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t worry. I won’t tell anyone. Let’s just take a few breaths. Okay?”

“.....”

“Hey, why don’t you come over sometime? It’s been a while. My little brother is dying to see you. Ha-ha-ha. After all, Brunor owes you big-time!”

“.....”

“Come on. Let’s go. We can drink the night away. Just like old times. I think you’ll feel better if we have a heart-to-heart. Ha-ha-ha!” Sir Dinadan turned his back to me...

“You’re right... I’m getting ahead of myself. I need to cool my head. I’ll stop mulling over these stupid thoughts... I’m down to grab a drink. For old times’ sake, Sir Dinadan.”

"I'm glad you're coming around. Ha-ha-ha. Don't cringe, but...I think of you as a daughter...when we're together..."

BSHH. Something ripped through flesh.

...I had impaled his defenseless back with my sword.

"...*Cough...* Sir...Mor...dred...?"

Blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Sir Dinadan turned back to look at me with a dumb expression on his face.

"That's too bad... Now that you know my secret, I can't let you live," I said curtly, like I was pushing him away.

"...It's time to part ways, Sir Dinadan... Good-bye..."

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Four yards apart.

Sir Mordred started to think...

What was I...?

—

"We can't leave this country in the hands of King Arthur anymore!"

"Yeah! Sir Mordred will restore our land!"

"We swear our allegiance to Sir Mordred!"

"Glory to the kingdom!"

""""RAAAAAAH!""""

The night before the fated battle, ardent knights had gathered at our meeting point.

"I promise I will become king...!" I shouted. "I will bring us peace, glory, and prosperity! I swear this on the king's sword...on Clarent!"

"Long live Sir Mordred!"

"Long live our true king!"

""""RAAAAAAH!""""

"AAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Three yards apart.

I...

—

"Why...did this happen?! Where did I go wrong...?!"

Camlann Hill.

Corpses on top of corpses on top of corpses. Bloody bodies of knights crowded the charred wasteland.

Hell. A gravesite. Doomsday.

"Curse you...Sir Mordred... I regret...swearing my allegiance...to you..."

"...If only...you didn't have...such perverse ambitions...! Ngh...!"

"Ngh... You...never...had...the potential to be king..."

"I-I'm sorry! I'm so sorry...! I'm sorry! I never wanted this to happen... I never meant for it to turn out like this!"

My fallen comrades pelted me with their grudges as they inched toward death's door. I just wanted to atone.

I continued to wander my own personal hell—by myself.

"I'm sorry...! I'm sorry! Dammit... Damn you...! King Arthur! Where are you, King Arthur?!"

I dragged along my battered body, searching for Arthur.

Two yards apart.

I—! I—!

"...You came, Sir Mordred..."

"AAAAAARTHUUUUURRR!" I roared, holding my sword in my fist as I sprinted up Camlann Hill.

I had finally found him. I was heading straight for the detestable man.

"—Gh?!"

I realized something. I wished I hadn't witnessed it.

On the top of the hill, King Arthur was...weeping, standing there quietly.

He was grieving over the lives lost, whether friend or foe.

He was crying.

"...F-Father..."

When I witnessed his tears, I realized this might have been a mistake.

You see, I was already dealing with second thoughts.

Was there another way? Does it have to go this way?

Is this our only solution?

But there was no turning back now. I was already dashing up the hill.

"Arthur...! AAAAAARTHUUUUUUURRR!"

Ah. Damn! Dammit!

For some reason, tears started to flood my eyes. I couldn't stop them. But why?

My vision began distorting under my tears.

I thought I had been prepared for this. I thought I'd been firm. I thought I had sworn to my heart.

Did I seriously think I had the right to cry?

Why was I weeping like a maiden at the eleventh hour?

Was it regret? Or remorse? Or...?

"Okay, Sir Mordred... Let's settle this... Let's end this... The curtain closes on the legend of the Round Table now... This marks the end of my dream..."

King Arthur picked up a lance and looked at me...

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

I covered my head under my sword, sprinting up the hill, almost out of my mind.

I was closing the distance between us.

And then...

Zero yards apart.

My consciousness snapped out of the past, returning to the present.

As I continued to sprint forward, the lonely silhouette of King Arthur... turned into Rintarou Magami.

"If I retreat now..."

For some reason, I had been reduced to tears, howling at him.

“...Then...what...was...I...fighting fooodor?!”

I had weaponized every ounce of strength in my body and soul, pushing myself to my limits...

And I brought down my sword for the last time on Rintarou Magami.

“...Luna, I’ll make you king.”

Rintarou was ready.

“That’s why...I’ll never lose again. Just watch.”

The Celtic pendant hanging from his neck started to glow.

He brought up his pair of swords in the shape of a cross.

A white-hot collision. Sword met sword.

Sparks burst, streaming out of their blades.

Blinding white light flooded the area.

“—Ngh?!”

“.....”

The ray was getting stronger.

Their vision turned white until it was completely washed out.

—

—

—

...What? What am I looking at?

I realized I had been transported to a completely different place.

Is this...St. Paul’s Cathedral in London...?

There was a large crowd of knights, lords, priests, and the general public outside. Nothing seemed to link them together, except they were all there.

I was part of that mass.

...Huh? What’s about to start?

They were watching with bated breath for something within the church precincts.

Their gazes were set on the sword stuck in the stone anvil.

WHOSO PULLETH THIS SWORD SHALL NOT BE BUT THE RIGHTWISE KING OF THIS REALM...proclaimed the engraving on the stone in gilt letters.

Is this Excalibur...?!

I gazed at it, not believing my eyes.

“Please wait a moment! Arthur! Are you serious?! As your sister, I must advise against this!”

A group had come to the base of the sword.

“It’s not too late! Tell the crowd that I pulled it out! That way, you can escape the burden of being king! I don’t think you’re fit for it! I don’t want you to get crushed! Please—”

It was Sir Kay.

“Keep it down. There’s no way you could be king! You’re welcome to advise Arthur, but think before you speak!” Sir Kay’s father, Sir Ector, admonished.

“What a surprise... To think someone would succeed in pulling out the sword...,” mused the Canterbury archbishop.

"Pull it out one more time for the audience! Then no one will question Arthur as king. Heh-heh-heh," chuckled Merlin.

And then...

"....."

Arthur stood in front of the sword, looking meek.

Wait! That's not him! That's—

It wasn't Merlin and Arthur.

It was Rintarou Magami and Luna Artur.

Which must have meant...this was their netherworld?

Was I looking into Rintarou Magami's heart over our crossed blades?

What was the reason behind this? Was it related to the hawthorn pendant?

"Now, boy. Our young king. On this most holy day of our Lord and Savior, you must pull this sword from the stone... *Blah, blah, blah*. Oh, if you pull it out now, there's no going back," Rintarou warned.

Luna quietly stood in front of the sword and grabbed its hilt, closing her eyes.

"Hey...Rintarou, will you always be with me? Will you always be by my side?"

He beamed at her. "Uh-huh. Don't worry. I'll be there until the very end. I'll clear the path to your future."

"Good. With you...I can go anywhere."

Luna smiled.

With no hesitation, she pulled the sword out and raised it above her head.

It emitted a brilliant light...and the entire world seemed to burn white again...



* * *

I came to my senses...

"Gah—"

It felt like my body was floating. I was looking up at the sky.

My body was swept toward the heavens.

When I looked down, I saw Rintarou posed like he had just swung his sword.

I had lost our final collision. I was flying through the air.

At his chest, the hawthorn cross was glowing.

Something about the light made me think of holiness. I couldn't find words to describe it.

Crack... Crack...

In my hand, Clarent creaked as it started to break.

Oh, I see... I lost...

I had reached the point of no return. I finally had to accept *that*.

I had no choice but to face the thing that I had pretended not to see.

I knew it...! I actually knew about this! I screamed voicelessly, as if I was trying to cough up something that was smoldering in my chest.

I'd done something that I couldn't take back... I didn't want to accept fault for it! I wanted to become the new king and save the world... I wanted to affirm I hadn't been wrong in the past!

But I had to accept this was the end.

I wanted to become king to make up for my mistakes. It was all I knew how to do. I had been clinging to the past.

Merlin had his eyes on the future, resolving to pave the way with a new king.

That didn't seem to change, even when they traversed time and place.

Hanging on to the past. Hoping for the future.

Their battle had been determined from the start.

Clarent split in two before shattering into pieces.

Gravity gripped my body, pulling me down and down...

A white moon seemed to look down upon me in contempt.

My consciousness washed in white. No move would save me now.

FINAL CHAPTER
A New Beginning

—
“...Gah?!”

When Sir Mordred opened her eyes, she was in an alleyway between some skyscrapers. Her back was pressed against a wall. She leaned her battered body against it as she slumped on the ground.

“...Are you awake?”

Next to her, Sir Dinadan rested against the wall, smoking a cigarette.

“How do you feel, Sir Mordred? ...Oh, you should keep still for a while. I slathered Recovery Salve on you, but it did nothing for your larger wounds...”

Sir Mordred took a good look at her body... She was covered in sloppy bandages.

“...Did you save me, Sir Dinadan?”

“More or less. I’m your Jack...and I’ve always been proud of my quick escapes.”

Sir Mordred looked at him in disbelief. He grinned.

“I’ve severed our ties with Hitoshi Kataoka’s faction. I imagine he’s out of the battle anyway. And from now on, we’ll...”

Sir Dinadan started to expound on their plans...

“...Why?”

Sir Mordred continued to hang her head.

“Why...Sir Dinadan...? Why are you...bothering with me...? Both then... and now?”

He narrowed his eyes, silent.

“I killed you! And for selfish reasons, too! I killed you—even though you cared for me since I was a child! Why?! Why...?” Sir Mordred asked.

“...I just can’t seem to leave you alone.”

As he looked at her, Sir Dinadan let his mind slip into the past.

“...It’s time to part ways, Sir Dinadan... Good-bye...”

You had spat that line, looking down at me...

“How do you expect me to leave you...after you sobbed when you stabbed me? In fact, I failed you for not recognizing your feelings when I was with you. I didn’t know you’d been driven into a corner... I’m the one who’s sorry... Tristie always told me that I’m bad with women.”

He smiled bitterly, letting smoke leave his lips.

“Dina...dan...”

Her head slumped. She started to snivel and cry.

"Ugh... I'm sorry... I'm so sorry...Dinadan... I...I... *Hic...*"

She buried her face in her knees. She looked her age.

Sir Dinadan placed a hand on top of her head.

"...Let's redo this. From the beginning. The fight had just begun."

"...Redo...what...?"

"I don't think you were entirely wrong. I don't think you were lying when you said you wanted to save the world. I think you'll discover your own path as king. Something that's true to you. Let's find it together in modern times... It's never too late."

"*Sniff...* Dinadan... Okay... Thank...you... *Hic...*"

Time started to pass for the pair who suffered a great loss at the start of the succession battle.

Their moments together weren't melancholic. There was something light and airy about them.

She opened her eyes.

"...Hmm..."

Her consciousness resurfaced from wandering through the dark. Luna was awake.

She found herself in a bed in the school nurse's office.

A group of silhouettes gathered around her, peeking into her face.

"Luna...! What a relief...!"

"You had us worried there."

Felicia and Sir Gawain let out a sigh, finally comforted...

"Ha-ha-ha. I suppose...luck wasn't on our side, Luna..."

Emma had woken up before her. She smiled wryly.

"L-LUNA! I'm so happy! I was so worried when you were the only one who wouldn't wake up!"

Sir Kay was bawling her eyes out, finally materializing again when Luna had gotten back her strength...

"Seriously, I told you she'd be fine..."

And...Rintarou was there, sarcastic smile plastered on his face.

"What's up? How was your nap, king?"

"....."

Luna slowly peeled herself out of bed. She didn't feel all that bad.

"I smashed that white sword. All your king's blood should be back with you now. But I guess that doesn't do anything for your physical wounds... How do you feel?"

"...I'm fine."

Luna blinked in surprise, examining her body.

"!"

Suddenly, she noticed something. She was holding a hawthorn cross in her hand. It wasn't the one that Luna had given Rintarou. This one had been made many years ago...by her dear childhood friend.

"....."

A smile broke out on Luna's face.

It felt like she had woken up from a pleasant dream.

"Hey...Rintarou, will you always be with me? Will you always be by my side?"

"Uh-huh. Don't worry. I'll be there until the very end. I'll clear the path to your future."

...I don't think that was a dream...

"Hey, what's up with you? Luna? What's wrong? Your grin is giving me the creeps." Rintarou scowled.

"Hmm."

Luna used her pointer finger to motion for him to come closer.

"Hmm? What? Do you want to tell me a secret?"

"Just come here! Lend me your ear."

"Okay... What is with you...?"

Rintarou approached Luna's bed, realizing he didn't have a choice. He inched closer to offer an ear...

Luna pulled him into a big hug.

"What?! Wait—?!"

Rintarou wasn't the only one who was surprised.

"....."

Felicia and Sir Gawain were similarly shocked by the sudden development.

"Wh-wh-what...?"

All the blood drained out of Emma, who started to tremble...

"AAAAAH?!"

Sir Kay screeched.

The room was going up in flames...

"H-hey...Luna?!" He was gaping at her.

Luna brought her lips closer to his ear.

"Welcome back," she whispered.

"!"

He didn't know what to do for a little while. He scratched his head.

"Welcome back? Shouldn't I be saying that to you?"

"Maybe. But...*welcome back.*"

"....."

He was silent, searching for the right words.

"...Thanks. I'm home," he replied uncomfortably.

"Wait a second?! Luna! You have no shame! Do you have any idea what you're wearing right now?!" Emma interrupted, attempting to pull Luna away from Rintarou.

"Hmm? What?Aaaah?!"

Luna looked down at herself. She was in nothing but underwear and bandages...

"Aaah!"

"Ah?"

"AAAAAAH! Rintarou! Perv! Idiot! Lecher! Deviant! Peeping Tom!"

Her face instantly flushed, veritable steam coming out of her ears. She shoved him away before wrapping herself in a sheet.

"Gah! But I—I didn't do anything—AAAAH!"

BAM! RATTLE-RATTLE! CRAAAAAASH!

Rintarou collided headfirst with the medicine cabinet.

The room was in shambles. This was their MO.

"Geez..."

Luna shouted at him, holding him by the collar with tears in her eyes. He looked down on her, exhausted.

Sheesh... Guess I'm going to keep protecting King Airhead and sticking by her side... Hello, antacids, my old friends.

He heaved a sigh and shrugged.

But...he didn't mind this. Not at all.

He didn't mind this embarrassing feeling...

He looked around and saw Emma and Sir Kay in a panic. Felicia and Sir Gawain seemed beat.

Everyone was there. The people he couldn't bring himself to hate.

Well, I feel like I've finally gotten it back...even though it's not my style.

Rintarou could feel a dry smile sneaking onto his face.

"Oh, right, Nayuki."

He tried to find the person who had made it possible for him—Nayuki.

"You saved me this time. Because of you..."

He stopped.

"...Nayuki?"

She was nowhere to be found.

"I think...it's...better this way..."

Nayuki could smell the night air carried by a chilly breeze, which tousled her hair.

She looked up at the sky. The panoramic view made her feel like she was free-falling through the sky.

She strolled through the school grounds, taking her time. Loitering.

"Rintarou will be fine with Luna... It's better this way," she repeated, as if to convince herself, talking to no one in particular.

...Nayuki walked forward. Aimlessly. Without a destination in mind.

The intimate scene between Rintarou and Luna flickered in her mind.

She moved as if to run away from them, as if to shake them off.

...She ambled forward.

.....

"Why...?"

In front of the water fountain in the front yard, Nayuki stopped in her tracks.

Noise canceled out by the gentle lapping of the fountain...droplets quietly plinked by her feet.

She wasn't talking to anyone.

"This is what I wanted... This is our happy ending... So...why...can't...I... stop...crying?"

Nayuki looked up at the stars, which were almost close enough to touch. She was weeping.

Distant memories flashed before her eyes.

"Tch... You throw me off my game..."

"Hee-hee-hee... Good boy, Merlin... I'll pat your head."

"I can't return to the past... I don't go by *Nimue* anymore... I'm just his classmate now... Then why...? Why am I...?"

Was she thinking about undoing the *Masking* spell that hid her identity?

Was she considering telling him that she was *Nimue*?

But it was impossible.

She didn't have the right to do that.

She knew everything would be over when she broke the spell.

She knew it would mean she would have to leave his side...

She knew he might even kill her if the reveal went bad...

"I already let him go...to atone for my actions... I decided to wish for his happiness... I thought I could leave Rintarou in Luna's hands..."

Nayuki wiped her tears with the back of her hand.

But they kept coming, even when she rubbed at her eyes.

"...Then...why...?"

There was no one to answer her question.

Her small chest flooded with emotions, crushing her heart.

They washed over her like tides in a storm.

As she thought back on their happy memories, tears continued to trail down her face, forlorn and forsaken.

AFTERWORD

Hello. It's Taro Hitsuji.

This is the third volume of *Last Round Arthurs* in published form.

I can't express my appreciation enough to those involved in the editorial process and its publishing and to readers who picked up a copy of the series. Thank you.

I can't believe we're already on the third volume.

It's high time Rintarou Magami—our unconventional protagonist—started acting like an actual protagonist.

In fact, I imagine readers have found it strange that I made him so eccentric. Maybe you've asked yourself if I've finally gone off my rocker.

He's not your average failure, like Glenn (from *Akashic Records of Bastard Magic Instructor*). It's hard to sympathize with his character even based on his principles. Sometimes I catch myself wincing at his violent actions... And I'm the author!

But it was all for the big reveal in this volume.

I love this kind of character development.

It's almost a trope in manga and light novels. The protagonist starts off as the enemy...or a nonconformist...or just plain nasty...and bit by bit, they get undone by some cute girl...until they become the good guy.

Like Hy—nkel from *Dragon Quest* and R—i from *Fist of the North Star*... I guess it's all up to interpretation. It would take forever to list them all. They all have some change of heart, swooping in to save the main character in a pinch!

I love to see it!

When Hy—nkel came running into the battle against Demon King Hadlar, I almost died from excitement. Ha-ha-ha.

It's like we look at these evil characters with rose-colored glasses. Or maybe I love the concept of a dark hero... I just think they're very cool.

I mean, look at Hy—nkel! Based on first impressions, I never would have guessed he would be their ally—especially from his comically villainous character design. But after he turned his life around, I thought he was the coolest.

I wanted to try it out. You can say I'm feeling good about myself.

Everyone was doubting me, since light novels rely on a sympathetic character... But I told the haters that I didn't care!

If you couldn't tell, I'm a chronic go-getter.

Segue from our difficult main character...

I wanted to put the spotlight on a real heroine in this volume.

The main heroine is Luna, obviously. But I think this character is a true heroine. I know I'm just repeating myself. But how else can I describe her?

Not the main heroine. The true heroine.

I know I'm being super cryptic. But this is the most accurate descriptor. I think you'll get it when you read the book... I hope...

It seems Rintarou has been thrown in the middle of a motley crew.

How will their stories unfold...? It would be my privilege and pleasure as an author if you followed along on their journey.

Taro Hitsuji

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